

Ancient History by pterawaters

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Summary:

When Nancy decides to check out Mrs. Driscoll's diseased rats on her own, she finds more than she bargained for at Brimborn Steel Works. When it becomes clear to Jonathan that there's something seriously wrong with Nancy, he has no choice but to turn to Steve Harrington for help. After what happened between them three summers ago, Jonathan would rather eat his own foot than work with Steve again. But this is about getting Nancy back, and Jonathan will do whatever needs doing to make sure that happens.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This was written for day 1 of Stoncy Week, 2021! Specifically the "you took a bullet for me" prompt.

This fic also fills the "psychological horror" and "mind control" squares of my tropes bingo card!

Trigger warnings include: mind control, psychological horror, canon-typical violence, blood, home surgery/knives, gunshot wounds, near-death

Not beta read, because poor time management on my part. Enjoy!

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The newspaper office was allegedly air conditioned, but Nancy still felt a trickle of sweat roll down the back of her neck as she finished cleaning up the conference room. It was four o'clock on the last Friday afternoon in June, and the only people left in the office were her and Mr. Holloway, and he was packing up his things. Technically, Bruce was still out working on a field piece, Jonathan in tow. They were sure to be back any minute. After all, Jonathan was Nancy's ride home. He'd better come back soon.

The phone on the receptionist desk rang. Though Betty had told Nancy she could just let the machine answer, Nancy felt compelled to show Mr. Holloway that she was more proactive than she needed to be. Maybe then he would let her actually write something. "Hello? Hawkins Post. How can I help you?"

"Hi, yes. I know this might sound a little strange," said the woman's voice on the other end, and Nancy had to roll her eyes. The amount of strange Nancy had been privy to over the past two years was more than just a little. "But I think there must be some sort of illness

affecting the local wildlife. I just caught a bunch of rats eating all my fertilizer!”

Nancy wrote down on the notepad in front of her, “Diseased rats,” before saying, “That is strange. We’ll send someone over to talk to you about that. Can I get an address?”

After writing down the woman’s name (Mrs. Driscoll), her phone number, and address, Nancy said her goodbyes and hung up. Looking at the note, she knew she was supposed to put it in the basket on Betty’s desk, but there was something about this one that made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. She felt like no one here would know what to look for when it came to unusual things happening in Hawkins. They’d say it was just rabies or something. Maybe it was, but then again, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe this was a story that would make all the blowhards in the news room finally take her seriously.

Nancy thought about waiting for Jonathan to get back and give her a ride, but honestly, he’d probably just try to talk her out of it. The address Mrs. Driscoll had given her wasn’t that far away. She was wearing flats...

Yeah, she was doing this.

Nancy left a note on her desk for Jonathan and left without telling Mr. Holloway. Certainly he wouldn’t begrudge her half an hour. If he asked on Monday, Nancy would tell him she’d gone on an errand for the office and he’d left by the time she returned.

Or something.

Whatever. She would rather ask for forgiveness, than permission.

Purse over her shoulder, address in hand, Nancy left the office and headed toward Mrs. Driscoll’s house. It took a good forty-five minutes to get there, but Nancy was on a mission. She was sweating fiercely by the time she reached the house, so she mopped off what she could with a few tissues from her purse before heading for the door.

Mrs. Driscoll greeted her, showed her the eaten bags of fertilizer, the rat she’d managed to trap, and then brought her out the basement

door into the back yard. “See this?” Mrs. Driscoll asked, pointing to what looked like a thin, beaten-down trail in the grass. “It’s like they’re heading somewhere in particular.”

“Have you followed this?” Nancy asked, taking a few steps along the trail.

“Oh, only to the edge of my property,” Mrs. Driscoll replied. “So, that’s everything. Can I get you a glass of lemonade, dear?”

“Oh, no thank you,” Nancy told her, mind full of questions about where this trail might lead. “I think I’m going to follow this for a bit. See what I can find.”

“If you really want to, I suppose that would be alright. Be careful of the creek, over between here and Kendall’s place. Wouldn’t want your pretty shoes getting soaked.”

“I will,” Nancy assured her. “If I find anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.” Mrs. Driscoll shrugged and watched Nancy weave her way through the unmowed grass and the undergrowth leading into the forest beyond the yard.

The trail became a little more erratic in the woods — nothing much more than a path of disturbed leaves and tiny, muddy footprints. Nancy slowed, bending down to make sure she didn’t lose track of it. A minute later, she started hearing the stream Mrs. Driscoll warned her about.

Suddenly, a scurry of sounds approached. Looking back, Nancy watched as a rat sprinted up the trail she’d followed and passed her, without any regard for her presence. Nancy ran after it, following the sounds as best she could. She caught up a bit when she was able to jump over the creek, while the rat had to swim.

Nancy lost the rat as soon as the forest cleared and it ran into a fenced-off meadow. Nancy climbed the fence, about to follow it, when she noticed the bull grazing fifty yards away. Though she hadn’t been raised on a farm like some of the kids in her school, Nancy knew better than to mess around where a full-grown bull was

involved.

She looked back, noticing that she'd followed the trail in almost a perfect line from Mrs. Driscoll's house to this fence. Rats weren't exactly known for their geometric skills. If they'd been healthy, they wouldn't follow a straight line like this. It set them up to be found and eaten by predators. They should be zig-zagging around, hiding their trail as best they could.

So, what could have compelled this odd behavior? Nancy guessed there was only one way to find out. She sighted a straight line across the meadow and started following the fence. Though she was fairly sure she ended up going the longer way around, eventually she made it to the other side. Finding the trail again, along with another rat speeding along it, Nancy followed it directly to...

An old, abandoned building?

She supposed there were worse places for diseased rats to hang out.

Nancy circled the building until she came to the front. The faded letters painted on the face of the building said, "Brimborn Steel Works." What were these diseased rats looking for? And why did they seem so certain that they would find it here?

Nancy had too many questions and not enough answers.

She thought about walking home (it wasn't too far from here, actually) and coming back later with reinforcements (Jonathan), but what were a bunch of rats going to do to her? To top it off, they were diseased, and probably poisoned from eating all that fertilizer. They were weak, poisoned rats, and Nancy was healthy and ready to run if need be.

The front door of the abandoned mill creaked loudly when Nancy pushed it open. "Hello?" she called out, just in case. "Hey, anyone besides rats in here?"

There was no response, so Nancy pushed the door a little farther and stepped inside.

Johnathan had been sitting at home waiting for Nancy to call for hours, when the phone finally rang. "I've got it!" he called out to the others in the house as he scrambled out of his room for the phone in the kitchen. "Hello?"

"Oh, Jonathan," the voice said, and for a second Jonathan was relieved Nancy had finally called. Then she said, "This is Mrs. Wheeler. Is Nancy there with you?"

It took Jonathan a long moment to switch mental gears. "N-no," he told Mrs. Wheeler, his stomach dropping with concern. "She's not there?"

"I haven't seen her. When did you drop her off?"

Biting his lips nervously, Jonathan told her, "I didn't. I was out on assignment. She left a note at the paper saying she'd gone home and would call me later."

Mrs. Wheeler sighed. "That girl is entirely too difficult to keep track of."

Knowing that he was the major reason Nancy usually lied to her mother about where she was, Jonathan apologized. "Sorry. Do you want me to go look for her?"

"Do you mind? I'm sure you'd have a better idea where she might be than I would. She doesn't tell me anything anymore."

Jonathan bit back the urge to apologize again. "If I find her, I'll bring her home, okay?"

"Oh— Wait! Here she is now, thank God."

Echoing Mrs. Wheeler's sigh of relief, Jonathan asked, "Can I—? I mean, could you put her on for a second?"

"Sure." Her voice dropped in volume as she said, "Nancy? Jonathan would like to speak with you."

He heard some rustling on the other end of the line, until finally Nancy's voice came through. "Jonathan?"

"Hi," he said, his chest warm with love at the sound of her voice. "Where did you go after work? I thought you'd call earlier."

"Just... following up on something." Jonathan recognized her tone. It was the one she used when she was technically telling the truth, but actually lying by omission.

He wondered if he should press for more, or if she would get mad at him for calling her out for keeping something from him. Yes, they'd been together for months and months, but Jonathan felt like he was still learning how to trust Nancy. He trusted Nancy more than he trusted anyone, except maybe his mother and his brother. Pushing away his distrust, Jonathan said, "Okay."

A long silence followed, during which Jonathan kept waiting for Nancy to speak. She said nothing. Was there something in his tone that had upset her?

Finally, he asked, "Do you want to get together tomorrow?" At this point, it was almost a given that they'd spend as much of every day together as they could, but he felt uneasy about her silence and what it might mean. "Maybe get lunch together?"

"Yes, of course," she said, her voice suddenly cheerful. "You can pick me up at eleven."

"Okay." Jonathan left space for her to elaborate on her change in demeanor, but none seemed forthcoming. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodbye!"

Jonathan replayed the conversation in his head as he hung up the phone, and tried not to let the sick feeling in his stomach spread. He was just being paranoid, wasn't he? There was probably nothing to worry about. Jonathan would see Nancy the following day and everything would be fine.

~*~

Bored to tears as the Saturday crowd had yet to arrive, Steve turned to Robin and told her, "This isn't my first summer job, you know."

"It doesn't reflect at all in your work," she said with a sneer, gesturing to the till.

He'd already apologized about the drawer not adding up right the night before. He wasn't going to apologize again. Instead, he sighed and said, "The past three years, I taught kids how to swim at Shady Rest Country Club. I don't know why I told them I wouldn't come back this year. It would've been more fun than this shit. Paid better, too."

"Tired of snot-nosed little goblins spitting pool water in your face all the time?"

Grinning at the opening she'd given him, Steve replied, "I don't have to miss that. I've got a snot-nosed little you this summer, spraying it while you say it."

"Oh, my god!" Robin cried with a groan. "That happened one time!"

Steve shrugged. He called it like he saw it.

From the corner of his eye he saw someone come into the shop. He turned to give them the standard Scoops Ahoy greeting, but stopped short when he realized who it was. "Henderson! You're back!"

Dustin grinned. "I'm back!"

The relief Steve felt at having something to do besides ice-cream slinging could not be overstated. He hurried out from behind the counter to greet Dustin, giving him the handshake they'd devised over the past six months.

Twenty minutes later, Steve was listening to Dustin's Russian recording, wondering how the hell he always managed to get involved in these sorts of things. At least this time it was just people, and not monsters. As crazy as they were, he'd take people over monsters every day of the week.

Honestly, he was glad to have something to distract him. It was the weekend, and the past three weekends, he'd seen Nancy and Jonathan walking through the mall, hand in hand. The sight made him feel several strong emotions.

He missed Nancy like an amputated limb. The space under his arm still felt empty without Nancy there. Seeing her with someone else always made him wonder what he could've done differently. Maybe if he'd listened better to Nancy, if he'd supported her and hadn't been so afraid of the consequences, he'd still be with her.

Sometimes he couldn't help but think that Jonathan had taken Nancy from him as payback for... well, for everything. Then he would realize he was being self-centered and that not everything had to do with him. It really didn't help that even after all this time, Steve couldn't so much as look at Jonathan without his stomach dropping to his shoes out of guilt. What really sucked was that if Steve could just stop looking at Jonathan he wouldn't have to feel that way. But he couldn't stop; it was like a compulsion.

All of those factors made it difficult to Nancy and Jonathan together, so Steve avoided them whenever he could. At least they hadn't come into Scoops Ahoy together. That would've been mortifying. Steve probably would've shoved Robin at them and hid in the back until they left. So, yeah. Having something to distract him was great, even if it was a seemingly impossible task. But what the hell, learning Russian from scratch had to be less painful than seeing Nancy and Jonathan together.

~*~

Just before eleven the next morning, Jonathan pulled up outside Nancy's house. Since the night before, he hadn't been able to stop himself from thinking about what Nancy could have been doing between leaving the newspaper office and arriving home. She had to be looking into something, right? It wasn't like...

It wasn't like she'd cheated on him or anything, right? Nancy wouldn't. They'd been going strong for almost nine months. Everything was great up until yesterday afternoon. It wasn't like Nancy would ditch him and go hook up with someone else. At least... at least not without having a fight first, right?

Who would she even go see? Nancy had spent almost all of her free time lately with him. When would she have had time to meet someone else? Unless it was someone she already knew. Someone

like Steve.

Jonathan put his car into park and killed the engine. He got out and jogged up to the house, ringing the doorbell and trying not to think about Nancy maybe having gone back to Steve. Of all the people Nancy could have dated before Jonathan, why did it have to be *him*?

The door opened and Ted Wheeler blinked at him twice before calling up the stairs, “Nancy! It’s for you!” He opened the door wider and mumbled something that Jonathan interpreted as, “Come in,” before wandering back into the house.

Jonathan stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He expected to see Nancy at the top of the stairs any second, but it took her a few minutes. Why wasn’t she as excited to see him as usual? Was she going to break up with him? Eventually, she ambled down the stairs with a frown on her face. As she got closer, Jonathan saw that her skin looked shiny, like she was sweating. What could she have been doing? The Wheeler house had central air, and it was noticeably cooler in here than it had been outside.

Was she sick? At least sick was better than unfaithful.

As Nancy approached him, stepping off the last stair, Jonathan asked her, “Are you okay?”

Snapping out of a haze or something, Nancy finally made eye contact, a smile on her lips. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“Do you feel okay?” Jonathan reached for Nancy, to put his hand on her forehead. She took half a step away from him before stopping, smiling at him again, and stepping closer, this time letting him touch her. “You don’t feel like you have a fever.”

If anything, she felt a little cold and clammy.

“You know, I’m not actually that hungry. Maybe we should skip lunch?” She put her hand on Jonathan’s upper arm, rubbing up and down like she was trying to ease his worry. “It’s probably just a summer cold or something.” Her lips twitched upward in a slight smile.

“Yeah.” Jonathan still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more wrong than a simple cold. “Do you want me to stay? Sit with you at all?”

“Oh, I don’t want to get you sick. I’m sure I’ll feel better by tomorrow.”

“Sure.” Looking around the house, an idea occurred to him. “Hey, is Mike here?” Wait, that was weird, just asking for Mike, wasn’t it? “I, uh...” He had to have an excuse, otherwise Nancy might realize that he... Well, he wasn’t sure what he thought, but cheating had slid to the bottom of his list of possibilities, and he needed someone to gut-check him that he wasn’t just being crazy or irrational. Mike would do, and he knew Nancy better than most. What sort of excuse...? “Will! Will wanted to me to ask Mike something.”

Nancy shrugged and shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Mrs. Wheeler leaned out of the kitchen (where she’d obviously been eavesdropping) and said, “I think he’s at El’s house, right, Ted?”

“I don’t know, dear!” Mr. Wheeler called from the other room.

Jonathan nodded. “Thanks. I’ll tell Will to ask him later.” Turning to Nancy, he realized that there was a slight possibility that she was actually sick. Not wanting to torpedo his relationship because of one little cold, he told her, “I hope you feel better. Should I call you later?”

She smiled, but it didn’t seem quite right. It felt perfunctory to him, not quite reaching her eyes. Well, if she was sick, that could explain everything, right? Nancy said, “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Okay. I’ll call,” he promised, before putting a kiss on her moist, clammy forehead and leaving.

He knew how easy it would be to jump to conclusions here, to assume he knew things that he didn’t. But then again, he’d been thrown under the bus by someone he cared about before. Nothing was impossible. He could just take everything at face value. In fact, that’s what he probably should do.

But it wasn't what he was going to do.

2. Chapter 2

When Jonathan got home after unsuccessfully trying to track down Mike Wheeler, he was surprised to find Will sitting at the kitchen table, open D&D books spread out in front of him.

“Hey,” Jonathan said warily, making sure he wasn’t interrupting deep thoughts.

Will looked up, setting down his pencil and giving Jonathan a smile. “Hey. I thought you were hanging out with Nancy.”

“She’s not feeling well,” he said, still hating how it felt like a lie on his tongue. “Do you know where Mike is? His mom said he’s at El’s, but El said he’d already left.”

“He already *left*?” Will cried, looking at the clock over the stove. “He was supposed to call me when he left! We’re starting a new campaign today, if we can track down Dustin.”

“You can’t find Dustin?” Jonathan asked, wondering if Mike and Dustin had both fallen prey to whatever it was that had made Nancy disappear for a few hours the previous afternoon.

Will waved his hand as he gathered up his books and papers, shoving them into his backpack. “He recorded some stupid broadcast on his radio tower thing, I don’t know. He’s probably obsessed with that now, just like Lucas is obsessed with Max, and Mike is obsessed with El, and you’re obsessed with Nancy.” He looked up at Jonathan with a sigh. “Why is everyone obsessed with girls all of a sudden?”

Jonathan shrugged. “Hormones?” He vividly remembered being fourteen and kissing for the first time, how quickly it had become all he could think about. “It happens to everyone.”

Will made a face. “Not *everyone*.”

Jonathan decided to let that sentiment linger without comment. Will didn’t need platitudes or assurances that he’d catch up with his peers sooner or later. He just needed to vent, right?

As Will finished packing his things and headed for the door, Jonathan called after him, "Wait! There's something..."

Will stopped with his hand on the knob of the front door. He turned and looked at Jonathan, his frustration melting into worry. "What? What is it?"

Jonathan was probably just being paranoid, right? Just in case he wasn't, he told Will, "Just be careful, okay. Something might be..."

Will took his hand off the doorknob and placed it on the back of his neck, like it was sore. When Jonathan met his eyes, he found them wide. Was that fear on his face? "What?"

Jonathan took a couple steps toward his brother and asked, "What is it? What's wrong?"

Dropping his hand away from his neck like he'd been burned, Will shook his head, "It's nothing."

"What if it's nothing like it was nothing last November?" Jonathan asked, hating whenever Will clammed up and stopped talking to him. "Nancy disappeared for hours yesterday, and now she's acting weird."

"What time yesterday?"

Not sure what Will was getting at, Jonathan shrugged. "Sometime between three and eight last night." He searched Will's face for any clues. "Why? What happened to you yesterday?"

"The electricity went out at the movie theater," Will said, like that had anything to do with anything. "It gave me the creeps."

Jonathan felt goosebumps raise up and down his neck and arms. "Like normal the-lights-are-out-creeps, or...?"

Though he half expected Will to brush off Jonathan's concern and tell him he was being paranoid, Will stood there with his lips pressed together in a line. Before Jonathan could ask him what he was thinking, he spat, "No! No, it's nothing, alright? Everything's *fine*."

Jonathan crossed the distance between them in three long strides, throwing his arms around his brother and gripping him tightly. Jonathan knew things were falling apart again when Will hugged him back just as fiercely.

His voice muffled against Jonathan's shoulder, Will said, "I just want to have a normal summer. I deserve a normal summer."

"You do." Jonathan squeezed him once more before letting him go. He sighed and asked Will, "So, what do we do now? What's the plan?"

Stepping back, Will shook his head. He moved one of the sheets of paper left on the table before saying, "I suppose we should call El and Hopper."

Nodding his agreement, he said, "We should tell mom, too."

Will grimaced and stuck his tongue out. "She'll go insanely overprotective again. I just got her to start letting me bike around again this summer."

Jonathan supposed they could thread the needle here, as it were. Cover their bases without sending up all the alarms. "Call El," he told Will. "She'll know if we should bring the parents in or not."

Will ruminated on this for a moment before meeting Jonathan's eyes and asking, "What about Nancy? What if it is...?"

He couldn't say the words, could he? Jonathan couldn't blame him. They all wanted to forget about the Mind Flayer and its army of demo-dogs. They still chased Jonathan sometimes, in his nightmares. He could only imagine it was worse for Will.

"I— I'll figure out what's going on with Nancy," Jonathan promised him. "I know what to look for."

"He likes it cold," Will said with a shiver.

Their mother had recounted to Jonathan everything the Mind Flayer had done to Will several times over. She'd been almost obsessive about it the first few weeks after El closed the gate, checking Will's

temperature at least twice a day, practically giving him heat stroke with all the blankets into which she'd bundled him.

Then, Will said clearly and decisively, "It won't be her fault."

Figuring this wasn't just about Nancy, Jonathan grasped Will's shoulder. "I know."

"You can't let her—"

"I know."

Will looked away and sighed before shaking his head. "You're going to need help."

Jonathan's stomach dropped as he realized Will was right. They didn't have a source of drugs that could safely sedate Nancy, and he knew she was stronger than she looked. To keep her from hurting herself or someone else, they were going to have to overpower her.

God, what was he thinking? He couldn't kidnap and restrain his own girlfriend, just because she had a cold. They had to be sure.

Will shivered again and put a hand on the back of his neck. He gave Jonathan a look, and that was it. Jonathan was convinced.

"Call the cabin, talk to El. If Hopper's there, we can get him to meet me at the Wheeler house."

With a nod, Will went to the kitchen phone and dialed the number written on the post-it stuck to the wall. Someone answered, but after asking a few questions, Will told Jonathan, "He's not there. She said he's supposed to be back later."

Without Hopper to help him with this, there was only one other acceptable option. As Jonathan's stomach dropped with dread, he admitted to himself that "acceptable" was relative, and something had to be done.

"I'll find Steve, get his help with Nancy."

With a nod, Will told him, "Good luck."

“You, too.”

Before he could psych himself out again, Jonathan left the house.

~*~

Any other Saturday, Steve would've been grateful Scoops Ahoy was drawing so much business. When customers were wall-to-wall, he didn't have any time to reflect on how thoroughly his life had crashed and burned. That day was not any other Saturday.

Dustin and Robin were in the back room, decoding the Russian message and he was stuck up here, slinging ice cream for what felt like everyone in town. Finally, mid afternoon there was a bit of a lull, so Steve took the opportunity to lean against the back counter and catch his breath.

He was halfway through stretching his arms when he spotted Jonathan heading straight toward him. Steve's first thought was that it was weird to see him and Nancy not attached at the hip. His second was that he recognized that look on Jonathan's face. Standing up straight, Steve braced himself against the front counter, digging his thumbnails into the soft particle board under the linoleum covering it.

Jonathan came up to the counter and leaned a lot further over it than Steve had expected. “I need to talk to you.”

Steve fought the urge to back up and put space between them. “We don't talk anymore,” he sneered at Jonathan. “Isn't that how you wanted it?”

Jonathan's brows knitted together and he met Steve's eye with an expression that was half fury, half pain.

Yeah, Steve could relate. He told Jonathan, “In case you didn't notice, I'm at work, staffing the counter alone because my shift partner is otherwise indisposed.”

Jonathan raised one eyebrow.

Rolling his eyes, Steve said, “If you're not buying ice cream, I'm

gonna have t—”

“It’s Nancy,” Jonathan hissed. He kept his voice low and leaned even closer. He still smelled like that same same laundry detergent he always had. Steve hated how he recognized the smell, and tried to focus on Jonathan’s words. “There’s something weird going on with her.”

“Weird-weird?” Steve asked, keeping his voice low. “Or Hawkins-weird?”

“Hawkins-weird.” Jonathan met Steve’s eyes, completely earnest. “She’s... I need help figuring out if there’s something really wrong with her. Like, mind-flayer wrong...”

“Shit.” A lance of pain shot through Steve’s heart at the thought of something bad happening to Nancy. Then he realized that some stupid Russian message meant nothing compared to the Hawkins shit happening again. “You told the...” He held his hand out at El’s height, hoping that would save him from having to say her name out loud.

Nodding, Jonathan said, “Will’s on it.”

“Good. That’s—” Steve looked over his shoulder toward the back room. Dustin was going to want to help. How could he pull Dustin away without letting Robin in on everything? Thinking fast, he told Jonathan, “Gimme a minute.”

Steve went through the swinging doors into the back room. Robin and Dustin both looked up at him, excited smiles on their faces. Before they could tell him about whatever they’d solved, he blurted out, “Family emergency.”

Robin cocked her head to the side and Dustin shrugged at him. “What?”

“A family emergency is what I have. The Russian transmission is gonna have to wait until later.” Pointing to the front half of the shop, Steve asked, “Robin? If you can?”

“What sort of family emergency?” Robin asked. “Did someone die?”

His teeth clenched, Steve replied, “Not yet.”

Robin’s jaw fell open for a second before she snapped it closed and nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’ve got the counter until close. Go... be with your family member.”

Sparing a nod for Dustin, Steve gave Robin a grateful squeeze of her shoulder. “Thanks.”

As Steve tried to get away, Dustin followed and stopped him just on the other side of the swinging door. His eyes went wide after he spotted Jonathan. Whispering, he asked Steve, “What’s really going on?”

Before Steve could explain, Jonathan said, “Will wants your help.” He joined them, looking at Dustin. “He’s been trying to find you. It’s about...”

Even though he trailed off, Steve knew Dustin would get the implication.

“Holy shit,” Dustin cried. He looked at Steve, “Family emergency, huh?”

“Let’s get out of here,” Steve urged the others, guiding them out of the ice cream shop, hoping Robin wouldn’t find out he’d ditched work because his ex-girlfriend may or may not have been turned against them by an alien monster.

“What are we doing?” Dustin asked them. “Where are we going?”

Steve thought it might have been good to have Dustin tagging along with them, if only to prevent awkward conversations from coming up. Before he could suggest that, Jonathan told him, “Steve and I are going to find Nancy. You find Will and the others. They’re getting help from El.”

“Wait.” He grabbed Steve’s arm, stopping him and pointing back toward Scoops Ahoy. “What if the recording is...?”

“Go figure it out, then!” He didn’t pull his arm out of Dustin’s grasp, as much as he wanted to, with Nancy in so much danger. “Please.”

Nodding, Dustin let go. "Good luck."

"You, too."

Dustin headed back toward Scoops Ahoy.

Jonathan fell in step beside Steve as they went the other way, toward Steve's car. Steve asked him "Where is Nancy now?"

"I left her at home, but I just called from the pay phone and her mom says she left right after I was there." They walked quickly, dodging the mid-afternoon shoppers. "She doesn't usually go many places besides her house, my house, and the paper offices." Before Steve could suggest it, Jonathan added, "I guess the paper office is most likely."

"Let's take my car. It's this way." Steve turned left, toward the exit.

"Why your car?"

"Because it isn't a rust bucket on its last legs?"

Jonathan scoffed. "We don't all have parents who can afford new cars... and country clubs."

Jonathan bringing that up surprised Steve and made him trip over his feet. He righted himself before toppling over, but his cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment. He sneered at Jonathan. "Do you want my help or not?"

Jonathan didn't reply, but they kept walking out the exit and across the parking lot. Despite the clouds, the air simmered and the heat coming off the blacktop made Steve want to turn around and go back to work. No. He was doing this for one reason: making sure Nancy was okay.

He only wished he had some idea of what they were up against.

~*~

Jonathan paused before getting into Steve's car, his heartbeat thrumming in his ears, and his legs trembling with the urge to flee.

“Maybe I should get my car. Follow you there.”

Steve frowned. “If you want to waste time, dicking around while Nancy—”

“Fine.” Jonathan got into the car, buckling his seat belt. “Let’s go.” The inside of the car smelled more like Steve than Jonathan had anticipated. The scent was familiar and anxiety-producing all at once, making several unwelcome memories bubble to the surface. Jonathan ignored them, trying to think instead about Nancy.

The ride between the mall and the offices of the Post was largely silent. Jonathan rolled down his window, the hot summer air diluting the smell of Steve’s hair spray. As if taking the cue, Steve rolled down his window as well. Jonathan didn’t even try to meet Steve’s eyes. There was nothing there Jonathan needed to know that he didn’t already.

Steve parked in front of the Hawkins Post office and followed Jonathan to the front door. Though it was Saturday, the door was unlocked when Jonathan pushed on it. Jonathan had heard that the editor, Tom, and some of the reporters tended to come in on Saturdays, finishing up final details on the Sunday paper before it went to the printers. As Jonathan led the way past the empty reception desk and into the empty bull pen beyond, Steve made a humming noise from behind him.

“What?” Jonathan asked, approaching Nancy’s desk to see if there were any clues.

“No one’s here,” Steve pointed out, like he was making some grand observation.

“Yeah, so?” Jonathan asked, shuffling through Nancy’s papers, but not finding anything. “People go out on assignment. They go to lunch.”

Sticking his head into Tom’s office, Steve called over his shoulder, “I don’t think they all went to lunch.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked, joining him at the door and following his

line of sight. There was a pool of blood on the floor next to Tom's desk, and more of it smeared on the wall. "Shit." He pushed past Steve to get into the room, expecting to see a body behind the desk, but there was nothing. Who's blood was that? Was it Nancy's? Had she done something? Attacked Tom or someone else? Or was that Tom's blood?

No longer in the doorway, Steve called from elsewhere, "Jonathan!"

He hurried to catch up, noting the trail of blood Steve had followed to the back door. As he followed Steve out into the alleyway and the bright summer sun, Jonathan shaded his eyes with a hand. Steve moved first, but Jonathan was quick to follow as he realized what was happening.

Tom Holloway, unconscious with blood in rivulets on his face, was being dragged across the parking lot. Nancy had one hand around each of his ankles, holding them at her hips as she dug her heels in and pulled him toward the open back hatch of her mother's station wagon.

"Nancy!" Jonathan cried as he ran toward her, his stomach sick at what she was doing. This couldn't be her choosing to do this, right? It had to be the mind flayer.

She looked up, a sly grin on her face. "Hello, boys."

"What are you doing?" Steve asked her, holding his hands up defensively as he closed in on her.

Jonathan took a longer route, flanking her to the left.

Nancy smiled brightly, and as Jonathan got closer, he could see she had flecks of blood on her face. "What does it look like I'm doing, Steve?"

Jonathan felt like he was looking at a stranger, until Nancy glanced over at him for a split second, her eyebrows tilting in and up, pleading.

She's still in there.

"You've got to fight it, Nance," he told her, moving closer as Steve approached her from the other side. "Please, you're stronger than that thing. I know you are."

Nancy scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Now, you wouldn't be trying to interfere with our plans, would you?" She pulled a hammer from a loop on her belt. "Jonathan? You wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

"We can't let you hurt other people," Steve said, drawing Nancy's attention. "Nance, put down the hammer."

"Yeah, I don't think I will," she replied, stepping clear of Tom's legs. "I'm doing important work. You'll see. We're going to build something *wonder*—"

Steve lunged at her, aiming for the wrist below the hand that held her hammer. He missed, and had to dodge away again when she tried to hit him with it. On her next backswing, Jonathan caught her wrist and twisted the hammer out of her grasp. He managed to throw it back toward the building and away before she punched him in the jaw.

His head snapping to the side, pain blossomed outward from the punch, rattling his head. "Ow! Fuck," he said, putting up his arms so she couldn't hit anything important again. "Nancy!"

Steve grabbed her from behind, lifting her off her feet. She screamed with rage and threw her head back against Steve's nose.

He stumbled, falling over and taking Nancy with him. Jonathan lunged for them, hoping they could wrestle Nancy down and stop her. His elbow scraped against the pavement as he got an arm and one leg around her.

"Let go!" she cried, scratching Jonathan's arm and kicking at his legs.

She did something that made Steve cry out, then elbowed Jonathan in the stomach. The wind knocked out of him, Jonathan gasped for breath.

Nancy twisted out of the hold he had around her, scrambling to get away. He tried to grab her ankle, but he was too slow. Steve tried as

well, but she slipped away, sprinting out of the alley, leaving Jonathan and Steve panting on the ground, tangled together.

Jonathan met Steve's eyes, realizing with a sharp breath just how close together they were. The problem with all the bad memories he had of Steve was that they were mixed in with the good ones, too.

With a shiver, he scooted away from Steve and got onto his feet. "Is it just me," he asked as Steve similarly righted himself, "or was she a lot stronger than she used to be?"

"It's not just you," Steve said, wiping at the blood under his nose. Nodding down at Tom, Steve asked, "What do we do about this guy?"

Jonathan crouched next to Tom, glad to see his chest rising and falling. "He's still breathing. We should probably call an ambulance."

"And say what? Nancy Wheeler tried to kidnap him?" Steve scoffed. "They'll never believe us. What if they think we beat him up?"

"Hopper will believe us." Jonathan was fairly sure, at least. He told Steve, "Stay there. I'll go back inside and call."

"What if Nancy comes back?"

Jonathan shrugged. "Holler, I guess. That's one thing we know you're good at."

"Fuck you," he said, though the effect was more than a little dampened by the stuffed-up, bloodied-nose quality of his voice.

Jonathan left Steve in the alley with his boss and called for help. As it rang, he wondered how the hell they were going to find Nancy again, much less how they were going to subdue her when they did. The only solution he could think of was to have El help them.

3. Chapter 3

When Nancy's eyes opened, everything looked distorted, like she was seeing the world through a fish tank. The noise of a rat skittering into the room sounded muffled, like there was cotton plugging her ears. Her body moved without her consent, getting to its knees, then up onto its feet. She shuffled toward a staircase, and the light coming from above. Nancy tried to remember where she was and how she'd gotten down here, but her last memory was of skirting around the bull's pasture, following that rat.

What's going on?

Nancy got no answer, and her feet just kept shuffling forward, one after the other. Going up the stairs, her toes caught and she tripped. Nancy felt the pain of her bare shin hitting the stair, but she couldn't lean down and rub it to ease the sting. Something else had to be in control, right?

Hey, asshole! Get out of my head!

Nothing. Couldn't it hear her? Or did it just not care?

A rat appeared at the top of the stairwell before jumping down each step in turn. If Nancy had been able to, she would've moved to the side to give it as much room as possible. The thing in charge let it brush right past her ankle, its naked whip of a tail whacking against the top of her foot.

Oh, god!

Her body didn't respond. No flinching, no gagging, no response whatsoever.

By the time Nancy got up to the top of the stairwell, whatever it was seemed to have a better idea of how to properly move her limbs. They walked toward the open door of the building they were in, stopping in the doorway. As Nancy's head looked around, she remembered where they were: Brimborn Steel Works.

One step out of the building and into the sunshine, and they jumped back with a hiss. The light *burned*, the pain worse than when Nancy's shin hit the stair. What was happening to her? Then she remembered.

He likes it cold.

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no!

If this was the Mind Flayer, how had it come back with the gate closed? Had it ever really left? Had the gate been opened again somehow? How had she been *stupid* enough to let it get her? How was she supposed to get it out again?

When they cured Will, it had taken a lot of heat. Nancy had to get her body temperature up. Somehow she had to do it without having any control.

Someone is going to come looking for me. They're going to find Brimborn. They're going to ruin your plans. We have to get home.

They took a deep breath and hurried across the patch of sunlight into the shade near the road. Every breath felt like she was in an oven. Sweat began to run down her back and into her eyes. Even keeping to the shade as much as they could, they had to stop and cool off several times on the long walk home.

None of it was enough heat to drive the Mind Flayer out. Instead, her constant efforts to regain control of her body exhausted Nancy and eventually she curled in on herself, needing to rest. When she woke up, she was at home, her head in the freezer, her voice telling her mom she was fine, she'd just lost track of time. Then her mom gave her the phone and Jonathan was on the other end.

At the sound of his voice, a memory flashed through Nancy's mind. She was sitting, tied to a chair, a bright light in her eyes, Jonathan telling her a story about a song. After a moment, Nancy realized it was the Mind Flayer's memory, through Will's eyes.

That's right. He knows all about you. He'll know how to defeat you.

"Just... following up on something," it told him, like that wasn't an obvious lie.

He's going to find out. You're not smart enough to fool him.

Nancy got a tiny flare of contempt, the only response she'd gotten from the Mind Flayer since she'd woken up.

Then it did something, shoving Nancy down into a dark place. She couldn't see anymore, and she could barely hear. Shit. How was she going to get out of this? Jonathan would be able to tell, wouldn't he?

Things were quiet for a long, long time before Nancy heard her father calling. "Nancy! It's for you!"

Nancy did her best to push her way to the surface. She wasn't sure if the Mind Flayer noticed, but she could see again, and she thought maybe she could influence her facial expression, if nothing else.

The Mind Flayer spoke to Jonathan, assured him that they were just sick, and that he didn't need to worry. Nancy wanted to plead for him to help her, to burn this thing out of her, but she couldn't figure out how to do it without letting the Mind Flayer know she could hear and see again.

Once Jonathan left (God, she hoped that was suspicion on his face, and not just concern), they went back up to Nancy's room and watched from the window as Jonathan got in his car and drove away. Then they dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a t-shirt before going downstairs.

They found Nancy's mom in the living room, and asked her, "Can I borrow your car? I think I left one of my summer reading books at the newspaper office."

"Sure, sweetie," Karen said, getting up and going to her purse. "You're looking fine to me. Why did you tell Jonathan you were sick?"

Nancy felt her shoulders shrug, and the Mind Flayer said, "I just needed some space. Didn't want to hurt his feelings."

"Next time," Karen said, holding out her hand with the car keys clutched inside, "just tell him the truth. I promise you, the truth is always better."

Nancy's head nodded and looked down, her voice saying, "Yes, Mom." They took the keys. "I should be home soon."

"I'll save a plate of lunch for you." Karen smiled and pulled Nancy into a hug.

Nancy couldn't stand the fact that something else was hugging her mother back.

On the way out to the car, they stopped in the car port, opening her dad's tool box and taking out a claw hammer.

What are you doing with that?

The Mind Flayer felt glee and pushed her down again. By the time Nancy was able to pull herself back up and surface, they were at the Post, entering Tom's office.

"Nancy! I didn't expect to see you here today. I'm just doing a final read-through before I approve the Sunday paper to be printed." He looked them up and down. "Can I help you with something?"

"Mr. Holloway," Nancy's voice said as she approached the desk, sitting on the corner in a way that made Tom frown. "Would you say you're a well-liked man? Well connected here in the community?"

"I— What?" he asked, a confused and disapproving frown on his face.

Nancy felt her fingers curl around something hard behind her back.

"Do a lot of people trust you?" the Mind Flayer asked.

"Well, I— I suppose..." he blustered. "What is this about?"

Nancy's arm swung around from behind her back and the hammer hit Tom in the side of his head. Warm droplets of blood splashed onto Nancy's face as she watched in horror as her boss lost consciousness and fell out of his chair.

Though all she wanted to do was scream, Nancy held back. She couldn't let it push her down again. She couldn't stand the thought of the Mind Flayer hurting people like this, hurting people she *knew* and

having absolutely no idea who it was going to hurt next. So Nancy held back, she stayed quiet, and she let the Mind Flayer think it was alone as it grabbed Tom by the legs and began dragging him to the back door.

They were halfway up the alley to her mom's station wagon when Steve and Jonathan found them. God, not those two. Anyone but them, or her family. Nancy couldn't stand the thought of watching the Mind Flayer hurt or kill either of them. When it swung the hammer at Steve, Nancy pulled her arm just enough to make the swing miss. When Jonathan took the hammer out of her hand, she could have kissed him. When they both tried to wrestle Nancy to the ground, and the Mind Flayer pictured breaking their necks, Nancy whispered that the better plan was to run.

They ran away from the people Nancy knew could help her, but at least the Mind Flayer wasn't using her body to kill them.

Nancy wanted to cry, but she couldn't. She wanted to burn the mind Flayer out of her body with the fury of her anger, but it wasn't hot enough. She was trapped, watching from the inside as the Mind Flayer sought refuge in an empty office on the other end of Main Street. It sat in the dark, air-conditioned room and waited, making a new plan.

Nancy felt sure that this time, it was going to wait until the relative cool of night time before making its next move.

~*~

Steve sat at one end of Hopper's cabin, watching while everyone debated what to do.

"We don't even know how the Mind Flayer came back," Lucas said, throwing a piece of popcorn at Mike. "Who's to say burning it out of Nancy is gonna keep it from going right back into someone else?"

"I'll stop it," El said, completely sincere and determined.

"Can you even fight something that's in someone's mind?" Will asked, and Steve thought the kid looked a little green around the

gills, nervous, or maybe guilty. Steve couldn't imagine what it would take to face the monster that almost killed you.

"Yes," El said, like that was that.

"Whatever we do, we have to do it without hurting Nancy," Mike insisted, pacing back and forth between where Will and El were sitting on opposite sides of the room.

Jonathan said, "I would hope that's a given," before looking at El, then meeting Steve's eye.

God, the way Jonathan looking at him still sent an aching shiver up Steve's spine was unfair. That had been so long ago, and so much had happened since then, but he still... No. *Nancy*. He had to focus on Nancy and rescuing her from the Mind Flayer.

"Maybe we need more information," Max said from where she was sitting on the floor next to Lucas. "I mean, we don't know where Hopper is, or Mrs. Byers. Dustin isn't answering his radio. What if it's taken them, too?"

"I'll look," El told them, standing up and passing Mike on her way to one of the bedrooms. She came back a second later with a bandanna in her hand. Then El went to the TV and turned it on, changing the dial until the picture was only snow.

Steve had to admit, this was kind of exciting. He'd never gotten to see El use her powers before. Not like this.

El sat down and closed her eyes before wrapping the bandanna around them and tying it behind her head. She sat crosslegged, her back impressively straight as she searched.

Steve looked around the room, noticing the way Max and Lucas held onto each other. Mike sat close to Will, his eyes trained on El. Jonathan...

He glanced away as soon as Steve caught him looking. The fact that Jonathan had been looking at all made Steve's face feel hot. He tried not to think about earlier, when Nancy left the two of them tangled together on the alley floor. It reminded him way too much of that

garden shed floor, back at the country club.

No. Thinking about that wasn't going to help anything.

El's voice broke the silence. "Dustin is still at the mall."

Steve sighed with relief. That meant he was still with Robin, trying to figure out that stupid Russian message and staying far, far away from the Mind Flayer.

"What about my mom, and Hopper?" Will asked, chewing on his thumbnail the same way Steve recognized Jonathan would always do. It made Steve feel oddly fond of the kid, even though he knew Jonathan wouldn't want Steve to have anything to do with his brother.

Steve had sort of gotten to know Will a little better over the previous six months, mainly because he'd been spending a lot of time with Dustin. The kid had always been quiet, and every so often, Steve wondered just how much Will knew about everything that had happened between him and Jonathan. Was Will just a quiet kid? Or was he quiet around the guy he knew had made his brother's life a living hell for at least a year?

"Hopper and Joyce in the woods," El said, drawing Steve out of his thoughts. "Going to a place called Ill-in-oy."

"Illinois?" Mike asked. "Why would they be going there?"

"But they're safe, at least?" Jonathan asked.

El nodded. "Safe."

Steve watched a relieved breath leave Jonathan's body. "Good. That's good."

Max spoke up, asking the question on Steve's mind. "What about Nancy?"

El nodded before going still again. Steve hugged himself, wishing he had someone to hold his hand through this. His eyes met Jonathan's again and his heart clenched. If they didn't get Nancy back, Jonathan

wouldn't have her either, but Steve cared too much about her to be that petty. All that mattered was Nancy's safety. He gave Jonathan a nod.

A look of confusion swept across Jonathan's face before he carefully nodded back.

When El spoke, her voice was unsure and wobbly, her face twisted up in pain. "Nancy's begging us to help her. We have to help her."

"We're going to help," Mike replied, closing a hand around one of El's. "Can you tell where she is? Where should we look for her?"

El shook her head. "It's so dark."

With a nod, Mike looked around and said, "I think we should split up and look for her. Recon only. We can't afford to hurt her, or let her get away again."

"Better to go in pairs," Lucas said with a nod, before smiling over at Max, who smiled back at him.

El took Mike's hand, which left Will reaching for Jonathan. That left Steve all by himself. Again. With everyone looking at him with concern, Steve waved them off. "I'll go find Dustin and make sure he knows not to trust Nancy. Get an update on the Russian thing. If it's connected..."

"Good," El said with a nod. Steve felt oddly pleased that she liked his plan. "Let's go."

~*~

Sitting on the roof of Starcourt, rain pouring down on him, Steve watched as men with guns loaded boxes of something into the mysterious room that didn't seem to connect to the rest of the mall. When it looked like the guys with guns might have seen them, Steve ducked, then tugged on Robin's hand and hissed at Dustin. "Come on! Let's get out of here!"

He was grateful when they followed. As they put some distance between themselves and the Russians, Dustin said, "We told you we

solved the code. Now do you believe us?”

“Yeah, fine, okay,” Steve said, wringing some of the water out of his hair, glad the rain had stopped. “But Russians aren’t the only problem we’re dealing with, alright?”

“What do you have going on in your life that’s more important than god damn Russians invading Hawkins?” Robin asked him.

“I can’t tell you.” Steve gave Dustin a pleading look. “It’s top secret.”

“No, you guys,” Robin complained. “You have to tell me! I cracked your damn code. You owe me.”

Steve had to admit, it was a fairly good argument. They did owe her. He met Dustin’s eyes, trying to get a second opinion on whether or not to spill the beans. They were halfway through the mostly-empty parking lot, headed for Steve’s car, when Nancy stepped out from behind a van.

“What are you gonna tell her, Steve?” Nancy asked, a wooden bat in her hands. “All about the big, scary monsters the government doesn’t want anyone to know about?”

From behind him, Steve heard Robin ask softly, “Is that Nancy Wheeler?”

“You’ve gotta fight it, Nancy,” Steve said, making sure he was between her and the others. “Fight it like Will did. Give me some hope you’re still in there?”

“Why?” Nancy sneered, swinging the bat like a pendulum that almost touched the ground. “We are so much bigger and more powerful than this tiny human life. Just surrender to the inevitable and join us.”

Behind the bravado, Steve saw something else in Nancy’s expression. Her eyes shined like they were filled with tears. She was still in there.

Taking a step back as Nancy advanced, keeping the others behind him, Steve asked, “Oh, yeah? And just what would we be surrendering to?”

“We want the girl. You lead us to her, or everyone here...” She paused before saying in a cutesy, very non-Nancy voice, “...dies!”

“You know we can’t do that,” Steve told the thing wearing Nancy’s face. “El beat you before. She’s gonna do it again.”

Nancy scoffed before putting the bat up on her shoulder and pointing to the mall. “We’ve got dozens of little soldier men between her and the gate this time. With that and the weapon we’re building, she will lose. And then this world will be ours.”

Between one blink and the next, Nancy lashed out at him with the bat. He managed to dodge the blow, but ended up tripping over his feet and having to scramble away before he got upright again.

The next blow of the bat glanced off Steve’s hip. Pain blossomed over his skin and deep into the muscle and bone, but adrenaline kept him upright and dodging Nancy’s blows, one after the next.

“Steve!” Dustin called from where he’d taken shelter behind a car. “Watch out!”

“Yeah, no shit!”

Steve thought he was doing well, that he’d be able to keep this up until the Mind Flayer got tired, but then she caught him on the arm. A zing of pain distracted Steve and he wasn’t fast enough to dodge a second hit. He managed to get his good arm between the bat and his vital organs when it made contact, and then his good arm was good no more.

“Steve! No!”

Huh. He wouldn’t have thought Robin cared about him that much.

His eyes watering and his stomach lurching at the pain, Steve fell on his ass, sure he was about to be beaten to death by his ex-girlfriend. Huh. This wasn’t the first time an ex had beaten him up, but it seemed like it was going to be the last.

Steve heard Dustin’s and Robin’s yells, muffled by the ringing in his ears. He watched as Robin shoulder-checked Nancy, knocking her off

her feet.

“No,” Steve groaned, waving Robin off with his less-injured arm. “Get out of here! She’ll kill you!”

Dustin yanked the bat out of Nancy’s hands and ran, leaving Robin to kick her, like that would keep her from getting up. Instead, Nancy turned and growled at Robin, black tendrils spreading from her neck up onto her face. “You should listen to your friend.”

“Holy shit! What’s happening to your face?” Robin asked, getting too close. Nancy surged up and punched her, making Robin stagger back.

Steve struggled to get back to his feet, just barely able to put himself between Robin and Nancy. “Get the hell out of here, Robin! You don’t know what you’re getting into!”

“I’m not gonna let her kill you!”

Seeing the depth of anger in Nancy’s eyes and the way the black tendrils crept and spread across her skin, Steve replied, “I don’t think you’ve got a choice.”

An engine revved in the distance, but Steve kept his eyes on Nancy, watching her size him up and figure out exactly how to kill him. A shiny tear rolled down her cheek, completely at odds with the fury in her expression.

Sure that Nancy was still in there somewhere, Steve told her, “It’s not your fault, Nance. Don’t blame yourself. It’s not you doing this.”

She blinked and another tear rolled down her cheek. The rest of her body growled, reaching for him—

— and stopped.

Nancy froze, her arms outstretched toward Steve, straining to move. He looked over as a car —Jonathan’s car — pulled up beside them, and El got out. Her arm held out in Nancy’s direction, El told her, “No.”

Nancy switched her focus to El, a smirk on her lips as she said,

“There you are.”

Others got out of the car, Mike with a dark cloth in his hand, Lucas carrying rope. Jonathan approached Nancy from behind, keeping an eye on El and his hands outstretched like he was trying to calm a wild animal. He said in El’s direction, “Help us put her arms behind her back.

El nodded, blood dripping from her nose.

Jonathan had help from Mike, Lucas, and Max as they wrenched Nancy’s arms behind her. She screamed and spit, writhing against their hold and ending up on the ground by the time they were able to tie Nancy’s hands them several times over. Steve stepped closer, wanting to help, but finding neither of his arms really wanted to respond as they usually would. Then Mike took the dark cloth, which Steve realized was a pillow case, and put it over Nancy’s head.

As the group wrestled Nancy into the trunk of Jonathan’s car, Robin asked Steve, “Are you okay?”

Steve shifted and flexed, wincing at a sharp pain here and there. “Nothing’s broken, I don’t think.”

“Okay, because I don’t understand what just happened. Did that girl —” She pointed at El. “What did she do?”

Dustin joined them, clapping Robin on the shoulder and saying, “That’s El. She’s got awesome superpowers.”

“What?”

“Nancy’s possessed by a monster, El has superpowers,” Steve told her. “C’mon, you’re smart. Keep up.”

Jonathan joined them, giving Robin an assessing look before saying quietly, “We figure Hopper’s cabin is the best place to do this.”

“What about the gate?” Steve asked him. “If we don’t close the gate it’s just gonna go right back—”

“What gate?” Jonathan asked, watching as El and the others joined

them.

“Nancy said it’s over there,” Steve said, pointing at the mall. “There’s supposed to be dozens of soldiers protecting it or something.”

“Demo-dogs?” Lucas asked.

“No,” Dustin said with a bright look on his face. “Russians!”

“Russians?” A crease formed between Jonathan’s brows as he pulled them together. “What Russians?”

“The ones with a secret room in the mall.”

“Holy shit,” Robin cried, grabbing Steve’s wrist and gripping it desperately. “Is that what the Russians have in that room? Some sort of monster?”

“No!” Dustin was practically vibrating out of his skin. “Nancy said they have a gate. That’s the only way the Mind Flayer could’ve come back, right? The Russians opened it.”

“Yeah, but how could they open a gate?” Mike asked. “Unless they have someone like El. I mean, the amount of power it would take...” He trailed off and looked over at the mall again.

“A mall’s a good way to explain all that electricity they’d need,” Lucas said.

Mike nodded. “And the construction they must have done.”

“So?” Steve asked, wincing at the sound of Nancy struggling in the trunk. “What’s the plan? Where are we going? What are we doing? We can’t exactly take out dozens of armed soldiers, even with El on our side.”

El looked like she was going to protest, but when everyone looked at her, she closed her mouth again, looking to Mike, then Jonathan, then Steve.

When no one else spoke up, Steve said, “I bet the CIA or the army or someone is going to want to know there’s a secret Russian base on

American Soil.”

“Sam Owens,” El said, her eyes going wide. “At home.”

“What’s at home?” Steve asked, in the same moment Jonathan guessed, “You have his number at home?”

El nodded.

“Well, let’s go!” Steve nudged Jonathan, saying, “I’ll follow you there. Don’t give me the slip, alright?”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow, which made Steve rethink what he’d said. Before he could get too embarrassed about the possible double entendre there, Jonathan shook his head. “Keep up, then.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Robin, you’re with me.”

“Me too!” Dustin followed them toward Steve’s car a few aisles away.

As they buckled in, Robin said, “This has been a weird fucking day.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything yet,” Steve warned her, starting the engine.

4. Chapter 4

The drive into the woods gave Jonathan the creeps as he followed a combination of El's directions and his memory of driving Will out to the cabin that past November. Nancy had yet to stop banging around in the trunk, and Jonathan noticed the way the sound made him clench and grind his teeth.

The gate had been closed! El had closed it. How could the Russians come into town and just open another gate? It wasn't fair, they were supposed to be done with all this stuff.

And yet...

Jonathan's past had been haunting him a lot this week.

His eyes flicked the rear view mirror, making sure, yet again, that Steve's car was following. Maybe they should split up somehow, just in case having everyone in one place was a bad idea. Then again, Jonathan tended to overthink most things. He wouldn't be surprised to learn he'd over-thought this too, and Nancy was going to be fine whether or not he spent time worrying about her.

Still, his stomach lurched and he felt like he was going to throw up, thinking about how much pain Will had been in before they chased the Mind Flayer out. Before *Nancy* chased the Mind Flayer out. How was he going to have to be able to hurt her in order to get the mind flayer out? Maybe someone else could do it?

Jonathan knew he wouldn't be able to watch.

As they pulled up to the cabin, Jonathan took a deep breath. He looked over at El and asked her, "Are you ready?"

El nodded, turning away and getting out of the car. Jonathan followed.

Steve's car pulled up behind them, the headlights cutting out just before the engine stopped. Jonathan found himself watching the way Steve got out of the car, wincing with pain. His memories of wanting

to cause Steve pain were vivid, but now that Steve was hurt, Jonathan wanted to help him instead.

Steve wouldn't want his help. Not after everything.

Jonathan focused on El and waiting for her nod before opening the trunk.

Nancy screamed, kicked, and hissed, but between the way her arms were tied together and the way El held her still, they managed to get her into the cabin.

"Close the doors and put blankets over all the windows," Jonathan told the others as Lucas and Max helped El tie Nancy to the metal frame under the mattress they'd pushed near the stove. When Jonathan turned to light it, Steve was already loading it with a log and some kindling.

Trying to ignore the way Nancy screamed and cursed at them behind her pillowcase hood, Jonathan grabbed the matches from next to the kitchen stove and joined him. "I can get it," he said, catching the way Steve winced when he put another log into the stove.

"I was a boy scout, too." Steve sniffed and took the newspaper from the wood basket, unfolding it and separating one sheet from the others.

"I'm not saying you *can't*," Jonathan insisted, watching Steve ball up the piece of paper and holding his hand out for it. "I'm saying you're hurt and should be resting."

Jonathan expected Steve to scoff or curse at him or something, anything other than looking at him with wide eyes for a second before handing him the ball of paper. As Jonathan took it and put it into the stove, propping kindling around it, Steve cleared his throat and said, "She's stronger than she looks."

"I know." Jonathan struck a match and tried not to remember standing behind the country club gardening shed, smoking the cigarettes Steve had stolen from his mom. "She had a bat, Steve. She wouldn't have to be any stronger than usual to smash your head in."

He touched the lit match to the newspaper, watching as it caught fire, the flames spreading across it quickly and lighting the kindling in turn. Behind them, Nancy's screams died down, replaced with frantic panting.

"Please!" she sighed as Lucas and Max pushed her closer to the stove. "Please, don't do this. You're going to kill me! I can't— I can't breathe!"

Yeah, Jonathan couldn't listen to this. Not again. He got up, practically tripping over the space heater Mike was setting up behind him. Jonathan wanted to make excuses, but when he met El's eyes, she nodded in understanding and tilted her head toward the bedroom door a few steps away.

Jonathan retreated into the room, closing the door behind him. Sitting down on what had to be Hopper's bed, he put his head in his hands and tried not to lose it. Every muscle in Jonathan's body wanted to go out there and pull Nancy away from the heat, comfort her until she stopped crying. It was a visceral ache that he knew he couldn't satisfy, so he focused on holding as still as he could.

The bedroom door opened and closed and someone sat down next to Jonathan. He thought it might have been Mike, unable to watch the others torture his sister, but it was Steve's voice that said, "I know this is, like, three years too late, but I'm sorry. About everything."

Sure that he had to be hallucinating, Jonathan lifted his head, looking over at where Steve sat next to him, arms wrapped around himself. "Are you seriously apologizing right now?"

"Why not now?" Steve asked, meeting his eyes in that way that always gave Jonathan an ache in his chest. He shook his head, looking away as he said, "I couldn't watch either. Not Nancy. Not when I still—" He sighed, but didn't finish the thought.

It was easy enough to read on his face. "You still love her."

Steve nodded.

Nancy's screams from the other room grew louder again. "No!

Noooo!”

Jonathan watched Steve clench his jaw and rub at his eyes.

Taking a sharp breath, turning toward Jonathan and away from the door, like he was trying to distract himself, Steve spoke again. “You know what I don’t get?”

There was a lot about the situation that made little sense, so Jonathan declined to guess, instead shaking his head.

“How people just ... stop loving each other. How does that happen?” Steve looked genuinely confused.

His stomach lurching, Jonathan said darkly, “You don’t want to know what I think.”

Steve’s eyebrows lifted upward. “You loved me?”

Jonathan sighed, closing his eyes and putting his face back into his hands. After a long, tense pause, Jonathan admitted, “I don’t know. I was fourteen.”

Nancy’s ear-splitting scream made Jonathan flinch. When he got his wits about him a second later, he realized he had his hand around Steve’s wrist. He met Steve’s eyes for a moment, expecting Steve to pull his wrist away. When it was clear he wasn’t going to, Jonathan drew back his hand slowly, like he was trying not to startle Steve.

He didn’t startle, but he did frown all of a sudden. Jonathan was about to ask him what he expected, given their history, but Steve spoke instead. “Do you hear that?”

A scream came from the other room. “That?” Jonathan asked, nodding toward the door.

Shaking his head, Steve stood up, going to the dark window. “It’s like a deep rumble. In a regular rhythm. Like the footsteps of something big.”

“Not early fireworks or something?”

Steve shook his head again.

Goosebumps spread from the back of Jonathan's neck down his back and arms. Realizing that everyone in the other room might not be able to hear those footsteps over Nancy's screams, Jonathan left the bedroom, closing the door behind him. The heat of the cabin's main room hit him like sticking his face into an oven. He spared a glance at Nancy, writhing and screaming next to the wood stove, and went directly out the front door.

Steve caught up with him a dozen steps out into the relatively cooler night. They stood close together, and Jonathan held his breath as he tried to hear what Steve had heard.

There.

Jonathan breathed shallowly as he listened for a moment. Finally, he asked Steve, "Is it getting closer?"

"Yeah, I think so," Steve said.

Then he heard the sound of a tree cracking and falling, its leaves crashing through the canopy like a wave against the shore. "That was kind of close," he hissed in Steve's direction.

Steve grabbed Jonathan's shoulder. "Nancy said it was building a weapon! She said El would lose against it!"

"So, what?" Jonathan asked him, taking a step backward toward the cabin. The footsteps rumbled closer. "You think that's the mind flayer's weapon?"

His eyes wide, from where he stood in the doorway, Will said, "He knows we're here," with a certainty that made the goosebumps on Jonathan's arms and neck prickle up again.

From behind Will, Dustin said, "Well, that's just great! Come on, we have to get out of here!"

"Nancy isn't cured yet," Jonathan pointed out, letting Steve pull him back into the cabin. "We can't leave until that thing is out of her."

“We’re all gonna be lunch if we don’t outrun whatever it is!” Max pointed out, earning a nod of agreement from Steve.

El stood up in the center of the room. “We can fight!”

“She’s close,” Will said, now back at Nancy’s side by the fire. He’d taken the pillowcase off her head and brushed her hair back from her face. Her back moved in rapid, shallow pants, the back of her shirt soaked with sweat. “I remember this part. We just need to get her a little hotter.”

Jonathan thought about the burn scar on Will’s side, the one that kept him in a shirt all the time, even though it was the middle of summer. He met Will’s eyes. “You’re sure?”

“If we don’t get it out of her, it’s just going to keep following us We can’t—” He looked over at Mike and the others. “We can’t leave her behind.”

Jonathan took a deep breath and shoved the poker into the fire. Getting Will’s attention, he pointed at it. “I don’t think I can...”

“She did it for me,” Will said with a nod, jutting his chin out. “I can do it for her.”

“You can do what, exactly?” Steve asked, but Jonathan caught him and turned him away from Nancy.

“Don’t watch,” he insisted. “Let’s get as much furniture blocking the windows and doors as we can.”

“If that thing’s as big as it sounds,” Robin said with a stubborn frown, “what good is that gonna do?”

Jonathan opened his mouth, but Steve said, “The more we can slow it down, the less El has to do to save our asses.”

With a nod, Jonathan went into Hopper’s bedroom, unsurprised when Steve followed him. Despite his injuries, he wordlessly helped Jonathan get the mattress into the other room and up against the biggest blanket-covered window.

Nancy moved in fits and starts, her voice ragged, her wrists and ankles bleeding against the ropes holding her to the bed. He turned away, heading back for the dresser, thinking it would be heavy enough to barricade the front door. From the other room, he heard a loud sizzle and Nancy's responding scream. He almost turned back, but Steve stopped him, wrapping his hands around Jonathan's forearms, letting Jonathan hold onto him in turn.

Steve set his forehead against Jonathan's and sniffled. "We'll get out of this."

Jonathan didn't have to point out how hopeless Steve sounded.

Nancy's scream rose to a crescendo, the heavy footsteps and crashing tress growing closer and closer. Steve's hands tightened on his arms. The others cried out and a door slammed before Lucas said at the doorway, "We did it. She's good. Get ready."

Jonathan wanted to praise his economy of words, but he was too busy helping Steve push the bookcase against El's bedroom door to keep the Mind Flayer from coming at them from that angle.

Once his job was done, Jonathan joined Will at Nancy's side on the bed next to the stove. Her eyes were closed, but she was breathing slowly, like she always did whenever he'd seen her sleeping. "You did it? She's cured?"

Will nodded, his face wet as he handed Jonathan a pocket knife. "Cut her free."

Jonathan gave his brother half a hug in thanks and got to work.

~*~

When Nancy came to, she thought the screaming was still hers. Then she realized that although her whole body ached, she no longer felt like she was burning alive. When she opened her eyes, they were no longer covered by the pillow she recognized from her mother's linen closet. A foot in front of her sat the stove she knew to be in Hopper's cabin. Was that where she was?

The stove radiated warmth onto her face, making her feel overheated

and uncomfortable, but no longer in pain because of it. A loud crash was followed by a rush of cooler air against her back. She recognized Steve yelling, “There it is! Get it! Get it!”

Something knocked against her, covering her back. Nancy gasped, sure she was about to be killed and eaten by the thing the Mind Flayer had envisioned. Instead, solid human arms wrapped around her, holding her tight. She recognized Jonathan by the mole on his wrist. Nancy tried to ask him what was happening, but she couldn’t get the words out, and she wasn’t sure she’d be heard over the screaming, anyway.

A second later, Nancy thought the screaming sounded like El’s. Was she here? That wasn’t good. The Mind Flayer was trying to get her, specifically. Using what little strength she had, Nancy shook Jonathan’s arm and told him, “Get... El... out!”

Before he responded, Mike called out, “Help! It’s trying to take her!”

“Get the axe!” someone else cried.

Jonathan left her, and Nancy strained to turn herself over so she could see what was happening. El hung suspended from one of the monster’s arms, everyone except Lucas holding on, weighing her down. God! They were going to tear her apart!

They needed more firepower, that was for sure. They needed—

Nancy wondered if the shotgun was still where she’d found it back in November. She slid off the two-chairs-makeshift-cot they’d had her on and crawled to the kitchen end of the room. A loud squealing noise caught her attention, and Nancy looked back just in time to see Lucas sever the monster’s arm. El and the others dropped back to the floor in a pile.

The severed limb released El, skittering across the floor in Nancy’s direction under its own, independent power. She shrieked, too weak to evade it, though she tried desperately, her heels slipping against the floor as she tried to back away.

Before it got to her, Steve’s bat sent it flying into the air and through

a window with an awful, squelching crash. Then Steve reached for her, asking, “Can you stand?”

Nancy wasn’t sure she could, but she nodded anyway. Steve got her halfway onto her feet before a portion of the roof above them was ripped away. The thing above them was even more horrible than the Mind Flayer had imagined for her. The huge monstrosity of raw tissue and bone opened its mouth, and Nancy couldn’t help but picture the few people her body had delivered to it. They were in there somewhere, never to be human again. The guilt curled around her throat and brought tears to her eyes. If Nancy hadn’t gone looking for trouble, the Mind Flayer wouldn’t have been able to get this close to El this quickly. It was all her fault. Nancy held onto Steve, sure they were all about to be eaten. She looked over at Jonathan, meeting his eyes and telling him, “I’m sorry.”

Jonathan started to shake his head, but then El raised both of her hands and screamed.

The weapon’s head split in two. It screamed and flailed in what Nancy recognized as anger, not pain. As its cry died down, Nancy heard Mike shouting.

“Go, go, go! Let’s get out of here! Get to the cars!”

“We won’t all fit in one!” Steve replied as he hiked Nancy up onto his back and got them out of the cabin just behind Robin and Dustin. “Scoops Troop with me and Nance. Everyone else with Jonathan and El!”

“No,” Nancy said. “I have to go with Jonath—”

The monster flailed and crashed into one of the cabin walls, knocking it over, completely demolishing the building.

“Never mind,” Nancy said, getting her feet under her when Steve let go and opened the back passenger car door. She dove in to make room for Robin to crawl in after her. She wasn’t even settled in her seat when Steve turned on the ignition and pulled away from the cabin.

It was difficult, but she managed to turn far enough to look out the back window, watching the lights of Jonathan's car follow them. The monster swayed toward them, but they quickly left it behind.

"Where are we going?" Dustin asked from up front, squinting when he turned back and got Jonathan's headlights in his eyes. Then he smiled at Nancy and said, "Welcome back to the land of the living!"

"Thanks," Nancy said, turning back to make sure Jonathan was still behind them. They turned out onto the main road, and shortly afterward, Jonathan put on his turn signal and moved over into the oncoming lane to overtake them. "Steve, slow down. Looks like Jonathan wants to lead us somewhere."

"Of course he does," Steve said, but he slowed down, letting Jonathan's car get in front of his.

Trying to ease the sting to Steve's ego, Nancy offered, "Maybe El's telling him where to go."

"The girl with the powers, right?" Robin winced. "She looked like she was hurt pretty bad. Maybe we're heading for the hospital."

Nancy shook her head. "I wasn't the only one who was flayed." When Dustin looked back at her in confusion, she explained, "They had someone watching the hospital. Or, they did, before..."

"Before what?" Steve asked, tilting his head like he wanted to make sure she knew he was listening. "Nance, before what?"

Swallowing down the urge to vomit, Nancy told them, "That monster didn't just come from nowhere. The Mind Flayer built it. Out of people."

Everyone in the car cried out in disgust.

Exhaustion setting in, Nancy mumbled, "Sorry," and laid her head back against the seat.

5. Chapter 5

The car went silent as Steve followed Jonathan's taillights all the way across town, pulling into the Bradley's Big Buy parking lot. The store was dark, obviously closed, so Steve didn't see the point, but he got out of the car just the same. Jonathan and Mike had El sitting on the trunk of the car, her injured leg illuminated and bloody in Jonathan's flashlight.

Before Steve could ask what they were doing here, Max crashed one of the shopping carts through the glass of the presumably-locked front door. When everyone turned to look at her, she shrugged and pointed at El. "Her dad's the Chief of Police."

"Good point," Steve said, figuring if anyone could get away with this because it was an emergency, it was her (and hopefully her friends). He joined Max, helping her get the cart back out of the door, kick out the rest of the glass, and reach through to unlock the door.

Jonathan carried El through the doors once they were open, while Will and Dustin helped Nancy. The lights turned on, and seeing Nancy look so tiny and frail made Steve's heart hurt. She looked pale, with dark circles under her eyes, like she needed to nap for about a year. He remembered he had a blanket in the trunk of his car—his mother's idea, after she'd heard of someone breaking down during winter and freezing to death before they could get help. At least it had finally come in handy.

Steve brought the blanket and an old sweatshirt, setting up in the cereal aisle, a few aisles over from where Max and Mike were tending to El's wounds. He balled up the sweatshirt for a pillow, and had Dustin and Jonathan bring Nancy over.

Her face pale, her hands shaking, and her clothes still damp with drying sweat, Nancy gave Steve a grateful nod and let Jonathan help her lower onto the makeshift bed. As Steve moved to get up, intending to give the two of them some space, Nancy caught his wrist. "Don't go."

Steve froze for a moment, watching Nancy's face and expecting

Jonathan to argue with her. Instead, Jonathan put a hand on his shoulder and said, “Just sit down, man.”

Nodding, Steve settled next to Nancy’s legs, watching as Jonathan sat just beside the top of her head. His hand brushed through Nancy’s hair, and Steve smelled the sweat still dampening it. He pulled the blanket around Nancy so she wouldn’t get too chilled, and listened to the kids an aisle over. Max explained how they had to clean and bandage El’s wound, starting first with soap and water. By the time Steve looked back down at Nancy, she looked dead asleep, her lips parted and her breath slow.

Jonathan caught him looking. Steve murmured an apology and looked away, belatedly realizing that Nancy still had her hand around his wrist. He decided twisting away was too likely to wake her up, so he left his wrist in her hold.

“Sorry,” he apologized again. “I swear, I’m not trying to do this, I just...”

“You still love her,” Jonathan said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Yeah, of course,” Steve insisted. “I can’t just *turn it off*, like other people.”

“You mean, like me.” Jonathan rolled his eyes.

Having to look away from Jonathan so he wouldn’t do something stupid, Steve cleared his throat. Then he took a few deep breaths before saying, “Look, Jonathan. I’m— I’m really sorry about what I did. I panicked and threw you under the bus like an asshole. You didn’t deserve everything that happened.”

Jonathan shrugged, a frown on his lips. “Yeah, no shit.”

A nervous chuckle slipped out, and Steve knew he couldn’t leave it at that. “I suppose it doesn’t matter that I was a stupid kid facing down parents who would make his life a living hell if they thought he was...”

“But you *are*.”

The way Jonathan said it with such certainty caused a pain in Steve's chest. He rubbed at it with his free hand, looking down at the floor as he replied. "Yeah."

"Yeah."

They went quiet for a moment, and Steve listened to the kids a few aisles over argue about New Coke, of all things. "Is there...?" Steve started to ask, before he realized it was pointless.

"Is there what?"

When Steve shook his head and kept his eyes downcast, Jonathan reached over and nudged him with his foot. Steve frowned at him for a second, but he recognized that Jonathan wasn't going to let it go. "I don't know," Steve admitted, sighing again. "Is there some way I can make it up to you?"

"Not... really?" Jonathan looked down at Nancy, brushing her hair behind her ear. "I kind of accidentally on purpose stole your girlfriend, so..."

The absurdity of the situation, and knowing Jonathan wouldn't have been able to steal Nancy if she didn't want to be stolen — never mind the fact that Steve had lost her first — bubbled up in Steve's throat. He laughed again. "I suppose you're right. I don't have much of a reputation left to ruin, if that's what you were going for."

"The sailor suit kind of does the reputation-ruining for me."

Looking down at the work clothes he was still wearing, Steve scoffed. "Yeah, this is not working for me the way the swim trunks did."

Glancing up, Steve realized Jonathan was very deliberately looking away from him.

"Are you blushing?"

"No."

"You're blushing!" Steve said with delight. Then he noticed Jonathan's hand still in Nancy's hair. "Have you told her about what

happened?”

Jonathan pressed his lips together and shook his head. “I’m sure she heard the rumors at the time. Everyone did.” He looked at Steve and asked him, “How the hell you kept your name out of it, I’ll never know.”

Steve figured he might as well tell Jonathan what had happened. It wouldn’t make a difference now. “You know those popular, mean girls who keep the rumor mill at the high school going?”

“Yeah?”

Nodding, Steve looked down at his shoes, fiddling with one of the laces. “My mom used to be one of them. She knew exactly what to say and who to say it to. I think she told like five different stories, and the only thing they had in common was... Well, *you*. Forcing yourself on someone. It was someone different in every version, so no one would know it was me, or that I’d been kissing you back.”

Jonathan looked away from Steve, sort of staring off past the deli case at the end of the aisle. Eventually, he spoke softly. “Everyone thought I was a— well, a predator. When Will went missing, I swear, the whole town thought I’d done it.” He looked back at Steve. “You did that to me. You and your parents. Your mom.”

Guilt sat heavy in the pit of Steve’s stomach. “I know.” He reached over and put his hand on Jonathan’s knee. “Hey, you don’t have to ever forgive me, you know. If I was you... Well, I would’ve wanted to do worse than break your nose and steal your girlfriend.”

“Who said I didn’t want to do worse?”

There was something about the inflection in Jonathan’s voice that struck Steve as dangerous. A thrill went up his spine and he didn’t know if he was being threatened with bodily harm or with something more interesting than all the making out they’d done that summer.

Narrowing his eyes at Jonathan, Steve was sure he’d implied both meanings on purpose. “You’re a dick,” he said, but that just made Jonathan laugh. It felt almost like they were friends again. Steve’s

chest ached, because he knew it wasn't going to last. This emergency would end and either they'd be dead, or they'd go back to their separate lives, never speaking to each other again.

Robin came down the aisle, sitting next to Steve and nodding at Nancy. "How's she doing?"

Steve opened his mouth to tell her Nancy was still sleeping, but before he could, Nancy spoke up. "I'm feeling a bit better."

"That's good," Robin said.

Steve shared a look with Jonathan that definitely said something along the lines of, "Oh, shit!" How much had Nancy heard? Had she heard the kissing part? Steve almost didn't want to look and see the know-it-all expression on her face. God, what if it got worse? What if she and Jonathan got into a fight about this? What if...?

Someone shook his shoulder and said, "Hey, Steve? You still with us?" He realized belatedly that Robin had been speaking the whole time he was freaking out.

"I'm here." He still couldn't look at Jonathan or Nancy. "What's going on?"

"We're moving to a safer place. Somewhere Nancy didn't know about while she was possessed, or whatever."

Sitting up beside him, finally taking her hand from around his now-sweaty wrist, Nancy asked, "Where's that?"

Robin grinned. "My house. It's only me and my mom in the big house she got in the divorce. We could hide a whole football team in the basement and she'd never know."

"Works for me," Jonathan said. "I'll have to call home again, see if my mom came back from wherever she and Hopper went in Illinois."

"Let's go, then. Better to get out of here before anyone notices we broke in."

As Steve helped Nancy to her feet, she frowned and said, "Tell the

others we can't leave any of El's blood here. If the Mind Flayer finds it, he'll be able to find her again."

Steve left Nancy to Jonathan and told them, "Me and Robin are on it!"

As they walked away, Robin hissed at Steve, "What was that weird energy back there?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Steve told her, rounding the end of the aisle and finding the one the kids had destroyed while cleaning up El's wound. "Let's just get everyone out of here."

The look Robin gave him let Steve know he wasn't off the hook yet. She was cooler than he'd realized at first. Maybe she wouldn't totally shun him if she found out that Steve was— well, if she found out he and Jonathan used to make out.

~*~

When they got to Robin's house and all invaded her finished basement, Jonathan ended up cuddled close to Nancy, wrapped in the same blanket. He tried to fall asleep, but he just kept wondering how much of his conversation with Steve she'd heard and what she thought about it and if she was just lying here with him because of the situation and really she couldn't wait to break up with him, now that she knew.

It seemed like almost everyone was asleep except him. And then Nancy shifted in his arms. She pushed her nose against the underside of his jaw and whispered, "Why aren't you asleep yet?"

"Why aren't you?" he countered, but he knew Nancy wasn't going to let him off the hook.

True to form, she said, "I asked you first." Her fingers trailed down his arm until she found his hand behind her back. She grasped it and brought it up, holding it close to her chest in a way that made him feel a little bit braver about what he had to tell her. "What you and Steve were talking about..."

Sighing, he whispered to her, "The summer I was fourteen, I got a job

doing landscaping at Shady Rest Country Club, out west of town. Steve taught swimming to the little kids there.”

“Oh, he did that last summer, too,” Nancy said, like she was just remembering. “He’s good with kids.”

Jonathan nodded. He’d watched Steve give lessons before, out of the corner of his eye while he was trimming back the greenery around the pool. “The only other teenagers there were older, so we kind of hung out on our lunch breaks, and while we were waiting for our parents to pick us up.”

“You became friends?”

Jonathan nodded.

“And then you became more than friends?”

There was nothing left to do but tell the truth. “Yes.”

Nancy was silent for a long moment, her breath slow and even against his neck. Then she squeezed his hand and said, “Thank you for telling me.”

Jonathan thought there would be more to the conversation, but he waited and nothing more came. Nancy grew lax in his arms, having fallen asleep. Jonathan thought he should sleep, too, but he couldn’t keep his mind off that summer three years ago. And what had it meant, spending most of the day today with Steve? Was this the start of being friends again?

Jonathan thought he would never forgive Steve for what he’d done, but sometime over the past three years, he had. It had been stupid to begin with, making out during their lunch breaks at work. Of course they got caught eventually. Steve was a stupid kid and he’d panicked.

It seemed like he’d grown up a lot during the past few years. Maybe it was time to try trusting him again. What that would look like, Jonathan didn’t know. What he did know was that Steve cared about Nancy, which meant he was a useful person to have around. So, what if he was still in love with her? Nancy had made her decision. It wasn’t like she’d go back to him, even if he was hanging out with

them once in a while. Not any more than Jonathan would.

He did have to admit, the thought of kissing Steve again held some appeal. He wouldn't. He loved Nancy. But there was something about Steve having been his first kiss. Jonathan swore he could still smell the sunscreen on Steve's skin when he thought about it.

Jonathan only realized he'd been sleeping once he woke up. His arms were empty, but he heard Nancy speaking quietly nearby. Looking around, he noticed she was sitting on one of the couches, speaking to El. "I'm just... really afraid it's going to go after my parents and my little sister. It knows everything about them."

"We should bring them here," El said with a nod, looking up as Jonathan joined them. "We should bring everyone here."

"How do we do that?" Jonathan asked. "I mean, just about anyone in town could be a spy, right?"

Nancy shook her head. "No, they'd be suffering the same way I did, trying to keep cool in this heat."

Supposing that was true, Jonathan thought for a moment before asking Nancy, "Is it smart enough to know it should go after Hopper and my mom? I mean, Hopper was there when you closed the gate." He nodded at El.

She seemed to ponder this for a moment before sticking out her chin. "I want to check on them."

"Yeah, sure," Jonathan nodded, probably just as eager to hear about his mom as she was to find out about her dad. Standing up, Jonathan looked around for what El would need.

Nancy touched his hand and said, "I saw a boom box over there. For the static noise."

"Got it." Jonathan made his way across the room, stepping over teenagers as best he could. The boom box sat on a bookshelf near the stairs — and right behind Steve. As Jonathan got closer, Steve noticed him coming and sat up.

“What’s going on?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

Jonathan reached over him, lifting up the boom box, then realizing it was plugged into the wall near Steve’s knee. “Get that for me?”

“Sure.” Steve unplugged it and handed the end to Jonathan. Their fingers brushed together and Jonathan shivered. Steve looked away and cleared his throat before asking, “What’s she looking for?”

“Hopper,” Jonathan told him, noting the interest on his face. He got the boom box and its cord settled in one hand and held the other down to Steve, to help him up off the floor.

Steve looked at his hand for a moment before meeting his eyes with a small smile and taking it.

The brush of fingertips made Jonathan shiver, but Steve’s whole hand in his burned. When Steve got to his feet, Jonathan didn’t want him to let go, but he did and Jonathan had to go on like nothing was wrong.

The others began waking up as they got El ready to do her thing. Jonathan plugged the boom box in next to the couch and put it on the end table. Turning it on, he found a frequency in between broadcasts and left it on static, the volume most of the way down until El nodded at him to turn it up.

She covered her eyes with a bandanna Lucas gave her and went. Jonathan and the others could only wait for her to come back.

~*~

While everyone else watched El, Nancy watched Jonathan and Steve. She wasn’t quite sure what to think of the fact that they used to like each other romantically. As they sneaked glances at each other, Nancy figured “used to” was probably inaccurate. They liked each other again, or maybe still, but either way, Nancy didn’t know what to do about it.

Maybe there was nothing to be done. They’d get through this crisis, send the mind Flayer back, and then never hang out with Steve again? The thought made Nancy feel like her heart was trying to

crush itself. She hated the way her feelings for Jonathan meant she'd left things up in the air with Steve. If there was some way Nancy could keep Steve in her life, she wanted to find it. These past few months she'd missed what they had together, at the same time she'd enjoyed developing her relationship with Jonathan.

Nancy was pulled out of her thoughts when El said, "They're going to the mall."

"Great," Mike said. "We'll meet them there and let them know about the Mind Flayer's weapon." He stood, offering his hand to El.

She took it, standing up for just a second before crying out and collapsing back down. "My leg!"

Max knelt in front of her, Jonathan not far behind. Together, they took the bandage off El's leg. While they inspected the wound, everyone went quiet. The silence shattered when Max cried out, flinching away from El's leg.

"What is it?" Nancy asked, trying to look over Jonathan's shoulder.

"There's something moving in there." Jonathan told her as he reached over and probed the wound with his fingers. "We have to get it out." A loud sob left El's lips as Nancy caught sight of something wriggling under the surface of her skin.

"Shh!" Robin said. "My mom's gonna hear."

"Get us something she can bite down on," Nancy suggested, wishing there was some way to bring El to a hospital where they could give her something for the pain.

"And a knife," Jonathan added with a wince. "As sharp as you have, heat sterilized if you can."

"Jesus," Steve muttered, and several of the others cursed as well. Robin left the room.

"What is it?" Lucas asked, and Nancy had to admit, she was dying to know as well.

She suggested, “Maybe it’s one of those little slug-tadpole things? Like from last year?”

“God, I hope not,” Dustin said, giving Steve a significant look.

“Part of the weapon,” El said through gritted teeth. “From when it bit me.”

“I don’t know if ‘bite’ is the right word for what happened.” Everyone looked at Nancy dubiously. “Never mind.”

Robin came back with a vegetable knife and a wooden spoon. “I hope you guys know what you’re doing.”

“Not really.” Jonathan gave El an apologetic smile as he handed her the wooden spoon. “Put that between your teeth.”

Nancy got closer, sickened by the way the thing under El’s skin wriggled. The tears running down El’s cheeks made Nancy’s heart clench. She told Jonathan, “I’ll help you. We have to do this right.”

Jonathan nodded. He looked up at El— held tightly in Mike’s arms—and told her, “Try to keep very still.”

El bit down on the wooden spoon in her mouth and nodded.

Nancy put her hands on either side of the wriggling life form, holding it in place. “Do it,” she said, trusting Jonathan not to cut her fingers.

Carefully, he sliced open El’s skin. She groaned as Nancy trapped the whatever-it-was, pushing it to the surface and out the slit Jonathan had made. It squealed, trying to wriggle back in, but El put her hand out and used her mind to throw it across the room. It tried to slink away, but Max smashed it with one of Lucas’s shoes, like it was a spider rather than a piece of the Mind Flayer’s monster.

Everyone stood around, looking at each other until a voice came down the stairwell. “What on earth is going on down there?”

“Mom!” Robin cried, wide-eyed as she ran to the stairs to head her mother off.

“We should get a move on,” Mike said, helping Jonathan wrap El’s new wound with some of the gauze they’d stolen from the grocery store. “We can’t take El to a hospital until we know the gate is closed and the Mind Flayer won’t come after her again.”

“I can fight it,” she insisted, but her face was pale and her hair damp with sweat.

“You already fought it long enough to save me,” Nancy told her, grasping El’s hand in gratitude. “Let us help you.”

El looked at Nancy for a long moment before nodding. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

They gathered their things and went out the back door, Jonathan carrying El to his car. Steve walked close, like he wanted to make sure Nancy didn’t need carrying too.

“I’m really okay,” Nancy told him, giving him a careful smile. “I’m feeling much better than last night.”

“Uh, yeah,” Steve scratched the back of his neck and cleared his throat. “About what you heard...” He seemed more than a little embarrassed for her to know about what had happened between him and Jonathan.

To put his mind at ease, she reached over and squeezed his wrist. “It’s okay. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“Well, yeah,” he murmured darkly. “Wouldn’t want anyone to know that *both* your boyfriends...” Looking away, Steve shook his head, ashamed.

“Hey,” she said, stopping and turning toward him. “It doesn’t bother me. If anyone should be regretful here, it’s me. I’m the one who treated you like shit. I should’ve told you I was hurting. I should have told you I had feelings for Jonathan.”

“I knew,” Steve whispered. “About both those things. I knew, but I didn’t want to let them be real. I just wanted to be happy and—and normal...” He scoffed, gesturing toward El. “What a pipe dream,

huh?”

“Normal’s overrated,” she told him as Robin came out of the house.

“Convinced my mom it was a stupid prank you guys pulled on me,” she said. “She’s helping with the parade this morning, so I think she’s too busy to question it. Let’s go?”

“Parade?” Steve asked before answering his own question. “Oh yeah. Today’s the forth.”

“Happy Independence day,” Nancy said sarcastically as they headed to the cars. “Let’s make it a good one.”

~*~

Steve pulled up to the mall, confused by how many cop cars and everything were already around it. There was still a section of the back lot they hadn’t cordoned off, so Steve parked there, Jonathan’s car pulling into the spot beside his. He got out, resting his arm on his car door as he looked over it. Glancing over at Jonathan and Nancy as they got out of the other car, Steve asked, “Think somebody found out about the Russians?”

“I’d say that’s a good guess,” Nancy said, reaching over and putting a hand on his arm. She had to stop doing that, or he was going to start thinking they could be a thing again, when they couldn’t. She was with Jonathan now, and Jonathan was with her, and Steve had to figure out how to move on somehow.

“Uh, Steve?” Robin said, and when he looked over at her, she was pointed in the direction of the crowd. “Is it just me, or is that guy coming right at us?”

Following her line of sight, Steve spotted a man with curly blonde hair, wearing a white tank top and jeans. “Is that...?”

“That’s Billy,” Nancy said, confirming Steve’s suspicion. “He’s one of them!”

“One of the flayed?” Jonathan asked, like he just had to be sure.

Nancy nodded.

“What do we do?” Robin asked.

“We can’t let him get El,” Mike said through the open back window.

“We can’t even let him know where El is,” Nancy said. “If he finds out, the monster finds out.”

“So, we bring the monster to all the army guys with guns,” Dustin said, motioning to the way most of the parking lot had been cordoned off with yellow rope and the occasional “Caution No Entry” sign.

Steve met Jonathan’s eyes, asking him with a look what he wanted to do. Maybe they both should’ve been looking to Nancy, but then Jonathan nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Go? Go where?” Mike asked, but Steve was already back in his car, buckling in and starting the engine.

“Come on!” he cried to Robin and Dustin, urging them back in the car. Billy began running toward them.

Steve pulled out of the parking spot and drove toward the rope. He waited for Jonathan to follow, but his car wasn’t moving.

“What are they waiting for?” Dustin asked.

“Don’t know,” Steve said, hanging a u-turn around a light post. “But I’m gonna find out.”

He raced back toward them, watching the way Jonathan hunched over the steering wheel, arm flexing like he was trying to start the car. The others moved around frantically. They looked terrified. Steve stepped on the gas.

“What are we gonna do?” Robin asked.

Billy was almost to the car. He was going to get El. He was going to get Nancy and Jonathan.

Steve figured the manslaughter charges were worth it, if it meant protecting them.

He hit Billy at 40 miles per hour. His body glanced off the windshield, cracking it, and up over the roof. He rolled off the back and onto the pavement. Jonathan's car started.

Steve made another U-turn, passing Billy and then meeting up with the others, headed for the ropes. When he looked in the rear view mirror, Billy was getting to his feet.

"Holy shit," Steve said, looking forward just in time to watch Jonathan's car snap the rope barrier. Steve followed. "I have a feeling we're gonna see that monster thing again," he told the others.

"You're probably right," Robin replied, looking back as well. "Pretty sure Billy's not human anymore."

"Was he ever?" Steve asked with a sarcastic chuckle.

"Yeah, he almost killed you last year, and that was before the Mind Flayer got to him." Dustin shook his head, looking out the back window.

As they turned the corner around the mall, they found a cluster of emergency vehicles as well as at least four helicopters parked there, blades still. Steve had never seen one this close before. "Holy shit."

"Great. We've got cops on our tail now, too," Dustin said with a scoff.

Steve followed Jonathan and hoped he knew what he was doing. They slowed, then stopped a good hundred feet from the outer circle of cop cars. Nancy got out of the car, her hands raised, and walked toward them, shouting something as she did so. Figuring he didn't want to survive a monster attack just to be taken out by cops, Steve cut the engine and got out, raising his hands so the cops would know he wasn't a threat.

Nancy was saying something about information they had and national security, but then a large figure broke through the line of cops.

“Hopper!”

Steve sighed with relief as the chief ran toward them. He put his hands down and looked at Robin over the roof of his car. “We’re good now.” He noticed Lucas and Max bringing the baskets of fireworks they’d stolen from the grocery store. Steve didn’t think bringing evidence to the cops was such a good idea, but they obviously trusted Hopper to keep them out of trouble.

“She really is the chief’s daughter, isn’t she?” Robin nodded at where El was hobbling to meet him.

Hopper engulfed El in a tight hug, and Steve was glad to see Mrs. Byers following him out of the crowd. He joined the rest of the group, hovering between Nancy and Robin, wondering if things were going to be okay now. He had the distinct feeling that things still weren’t quite right. It was like he could *almost* hear something.

A slow pulse?

No, footsteps...

From beside Jonathan and Mrs. Byers, Will put a hand to the back of his neck, turning toward the woods across the street from the mall. “Guys...?”

No one seemed to hear Will, except for Steve.

“Guys!” Steve shouted, getting everyone’s attention and pointing at Will. “It’s coming?”

“It’s coming,” Will confirmed with a nod.

Steve caught sight of Billy coming around the corner of the mall. He was still a good hundred yards away, but he was closing in fast. “It knows she’s here.”

“We have to close the gate,” Mike said, heading toward the line of cops between him and the mall. Several of the cops raised their weapons, but that didn’t deter him. He called back to the group, “It’s the only way to keep her safe!”

Hopper lifted El into his arms and followed, so Steve and everyone else followed him. Steve caught Hopper tell one of the cops, “Don’t let that blonde guy through. Shoot him if you have to.”

“Yes, sir,” said the cop, looking entirely too nervous for Steve’s comfort.

The crashing of trees splintering and falling, followed by a scream, drew Steve’s attention back to the woods. Emerging from it was a huge beast the color of blood and almost as tall as the trees. It had too many legs—eight, maybe—and its familiar head was full of grimy, white teeth. Somehow it seemed even more terrifying than it had the night before, in the dark. A tidal wave of surprised exclamations shuddered through the line of cops as Steve passed through it.

“Uh, boss?” asked one of the cops. Steve thought he recognized him as the one that chased him after his fight with Jonathan. “What the hell is that?”

6. Chapter 6

“Holy shit,” Hopper said, before meeting Jonathan’s eyes. Then he very deliberately put El in Jonathan’s hands and told him, “Get her out of here.”

“But I can fight!” El said, even as Jonathan nodded at Hopper, taking on the responsibility being given to him.

Hopper cupped El’s face in his hand and said, “I know you can. Better than any of us.” He gave her a sad smile.

The pop of a gun from the line closest to the monster made Jonathan flinch.

Continuing, Hopper said to El, “But you’re hurt, and we’ve got the whole U.S. military here to protect you.” He gestured at the line of cops and soldiers who all began shooting at the mind flayer’s monster. Hopper reached over and put a hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “Keep her safe.”

Jonathan nodded again, getting El’s okay before putting her arm across his shoulders.

Beside him, Steve asked, “You guys know how to get to the Russians and the gate, right?”

Hopper pointed to a man standing with Jonathan’s mom and— was that Murray? What was Murray doing here? “We’ve got an inside man. We’re on it. Just keep her away from that thing until we can get this situation taken care of.”

“Come on,” Jonathan said. “Let’s get back in the car. We can make it farther...”

Turning, Jonathan saw Billy had made it to his car, popped open the hood, and had pulled out several hoses and wires. “Shit.”

“We can’t all fit in my car,” Steve said with a grimace. He took half a step in that direction anyway before Nancy stopped him.

“This way,” she said, tugging Steve’s arm before letting go and leading the way to the mall. “These doors are open. We can cut through and put that much more distance between us.

Mike stepped in, helping Jonathan take some of El’s weight. Together, they and the other kids went into the mall, leaving the sounds of a quickly escalating battle behind them. They entered at the food court, passing Scoops Ahoy and heading toward the other side of the mall. They were most of the way there when El whimpered and stumbled. Jonathan slowed down, trying to figure out if he could pick her up, when exclamations from behind him caught Jonathan’s attention.

Looking over the group, Jonathan realized that Will was missing. He followed everyone’s gaze and saw that Will wasn’t just missing. He’d been grabbed by a tall man with dark hair, a black leather jacket, and black fingerless gloves. The man held a pistol to the side of Will’s head.

Jonathan’s heart stopped.

There was a lot of yelling going on, but Jonathan didn’t understand any of it. All he could see was his brother in danger. El and Nancy were both holding onto Jonathan, like they knew he needed it. Steve, the jackass, was moving toward the man with the gun.

“Just take me, okay?” Steve was saying, his hands up as he took one careful step, and then another. “I work here, see?” He gestured to his uniform. “I know how to get you out through the back hallways. Come on, he’s just a kid. They’re all just kids. Take me.”

“You are not kid?” The man said with a scoff, his accent making Jonathan realize he had to be one of the Russian agents.

“Not anymore,” Steve said, taking another step.

“Maybe I have better luck taking kid,” he said, pressing the gun into Will’s temple, making him wince.

Jonathan took half a step forward before Nancy stopped him.

“Yeah, maybe,” Steve said, “but I’m begging you, please. Don’t take

this kid away from his family. Take me instead.” He took another step toward the man.

“Steve,” Jonathan said, without really meaning to.

Steve looked back at him, gave him a little half-smile, and said, “It’ll be okay.” Then he told the man, “Come on. You could be getting away right now.”

The man moved the gun from Will’s temple to point it at Steve. He shoved Will away from him, and the group reeled him in, Dustin first, then Mike, then Jonathan. He hugged his brother tightly, but he couldn’t help but watch as the man grabbed Steve, putting the gun against Steve’s back and wrapping a thick arm around his neck.

A sharp pain in Jonathan’s chest made him gasp, and his throat felt tight. Nancy grasped his hand tightly, her eyes wide, her lip trembling.

Nodding at the group of them, the man said, “You do not follow.”

“Yeah, guys. Don’t—” Steve was cut off when the Russian yanked him by the neck, choking him and making him stumble. Nancy took half a step toward them, but Jonathan stopped her.

He looked to El, asking her in a soft voice, “Is there anything you can do?”

“I’m trying,” she cried, her voice cracking and tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. “I can’t...”

“Her battery’s too low,” Mike explained. “We have to get her out of here.”

“But, Steve...?” Jonathan looked to Nancy. She always had ideas. Always. So why was she looking at him with her lips parted and a crease between her brows?

Steve and the Russian backed through the food court, heading for the Scoops Ahoy.

Jonathan watched the doorway where Steve and the Russian had

disappeared, like he was expecting Steve to come back through it. Beside him, Nancy said, "We need to get El out of here."

"I know," Jonathan replied, forcing himself to turn away. He couldn't help feeling like he was never going to see Steve again. Nancy gave him a look, like she knew what he was thinking.

The sound of gunfire got louder, as did a rhythmic rumble that made Jonathan's hair stand on end. By unspoken agreement, they sped up, running through the mall as best they could. An ear-splitting crash behind them made Jonathan's blood run cold. The monster was in the mall with them. They weren't going to make it. Steve's sacrifice was going to be for nothing.

Jonathan couldn't let that happen.

"Come here," he said to El, picking her up. She was smaller than Nancy, and light, but it was still difficult to run with her in his arms. He made it work as best he could.

When Nancy stopped suddenly, Jonathan almost ran into her. He was about to ask why they weren't getting the hell out of there when he looked up and saw Billy in their way. "Shit." They must've slowed down enough to let him get ahead of them like this.

The crashing noises behind them grew louder, and Jonathan looked back to see the Mind Flayer's weapon turn around the corner from the food court and barrel toward them.

"How did it get past everyone?" Jonathan asked, letting El out of his arms when she pushed on his shoulder to get free.

"Stupid military and their stupid guns!" Mike cried, pushing closer as Billy approached from the other side. "We're trapped."

"Help me with this!" Lucas said, setting down the basket of fireworks he'd been lagging around. He handed Jonathan a firework and a lighter. "Get ready to throw them at the monster."

"What about Billy?" Jonathan asked. "This isn't going--"

BANG!

The sound came from beside Jonathan. Glancing over he saw that Nancy had a gun. She fired it twice more. Billy slowed, three dark splotches spreading across his white shirt. Ten feet away from them he stopped, slumping to the ground.

Turning to Nancy, Jonathan asked her, "Where did you get that?"

Breathless and smiling, she said, "Lifted it off one of the cops." When Jonathan didn't smile back at her, she said defensively, "Just in case!"

An explosion went off behind them, deafening Jonathan. He turned and saw Will throw a lit firework at the monster. Max lit one and threw it as well. "Let's get out of here!" he yelled at the others, but they didn't listen, or couldn't hear him. The monster reeled after every hit, screaming in pain (or whatever a monster made out of people could feel), but it kept taking step after step forward. Jonathan lit the firework they'd given him and threw it, watching it bounce off the raw surface of the monster and skitter to the floor before exploding. Again, it seemed to pain the monster, but didn't do much to stop it, just slowing it down. "This isn't enough!"

El stepped closer to the monster, holding up both her hands. She trembled and screamed and it didn't seem like anything was happening until the monster flew away from them, tumbling and landing on its back. Lucas and Max ran after it, pelting it with two new fireworks before returning to the group.

"Let's go!" Max cried as she helped Will pick up the basket with the remaining fireworks.

Jonathan pocketed the lighter Lucas had given him and went back to help Mike with El. She was limp in his arms, unconscious with blood leaking from her nose and eyes. "Shit, is she okay?"

"She's still breathing," Mike said, struggling to get El up into his arms.

"Here, let me." Jonathan took a quick glance backward as he hefted El over his shoulders in more of a fireman's carry. The monster was scrambling to get to its feet, and something about its cries seemed terrifyingly angry. As a group, they ran down the mall corridor, past

Billy. The body seemed to be disintegrating far too quickly for one that couldn't have died more than two minutes ago. Jonathan didn't want to think too hard about how easily that could have been Nancy.

Jonathan ran. His legs burned and his lungs couldn't get enough air, but he kept running. When they got to the doors, Mike held open one, and Nancy the next, and then they were running across the parking lot. The monster crashed through the side of the mall, the initial cacophony followed by the shower of shattered glass scattering across the pavement. The squealing followed by the blast of another firework sounded off behind him.

Jonathan's knee faltered and he stumbled, just barely able to avoid dropping El. He mustered what strength he could, knowing that the whole world depended on him keeping El safe from the monster. There was no room for error, no room to stop and take a breath. (No room to wonder what had happened to Steve.)

They made it past the abandoned stockade of rope and cop cars, heading for the street, and the cover of the woods on the other side of it. Jonathan's legs wobbled. He was running out of stamina, hitting a wall he didn't know how to push through.

"Here. Let us take her," Mike said, lifting her down and into the waiting arms of Dustin and Lucas. The three of them carried her, Jonathan needing Nancy's help to keep up, into the woods. Jonathan didn't want to think about the possibility that the trees weren't going to be strong enough cover to escape that thing.

His leg not lifting as high as he'd intended, Jonathan tripped over a root, catching himself on one knee and both hands in the muddy leaf-litter. He knelt there, breathing hard and trying to get up, when he realized something. The light from the parking lot was gone. The lamps had turned off. He couldn't hear the heavy footsteps of the monster chasing them.

Jonathan caught Nancy's eye as she reached down to help him up. "Is it...?"

Looking over her shoulder, she said, "I don't know. I can't hear it. Can't see anything."

The lights from the parking lot flickered back on, shining through the trees. Jonathan followed Nancy back to the edge of the woods and there, in the parking lot, lit by dozens of street lamps, sat the monster. Jonathan watched it, waiting for it to start moving again, but it didn't.

Wailing sirens broke the stillness of the night, and Jonathan wondered if there would be any ambulances among them. "We need to get El to—"

"Yeah, we do," Nancy agreed, patting Jonathan's shoulder and running toward Mike and the others.

Jonathan caught his breath, looking at the mall and wondering where Steve and his Russian were. It was strange, once again hoping Steve was alright after years of wishing he would go die in a hole somewhere so Jonathan wouldn't have to see him and remember what he'd done.

The slog back toward the mall was slower and more weary than their flight away from it. Every so often they switched off who was carrying El until an EMT saw them coming and met them with a stretcher. Following El and her EMTs, they ended up in a triage area for wounded police and military officers. Jonathan found his mom there, hugging her tightly before looking for the other person he'd been separated from.

"Is he here?" Jonathan asked Nancy, knowing she would be able to ask the right questions to get the answers they needed. Unfortunately, the answer ended up being, "No."

"If that Russian still has him..." Nancy said, chewing at her thumbnail.

"Do you think we should go look for him?" Jonathan asked her. "The Russian could have left him tied up somewhere."

Nancy looked over at the mall and nodded. "We should go check, anyway. Tell your mom where we're going."

Nancy barely waited for him before hurrying back into the mall.

Exhausted, Jonathan struggled to keep up with her. Still, it seemed urgent enough that they find Steve soon, and Jonathan found a second wind to carry on the search.

Though the cops and military were concerned with keeping people away from the giant dead thing in the parking lot on the far side of the mall, it was easy enough to slip back in the close side when no one was looking. They headed for the food court, and Scoops Ahoy. The gate across the storefront had been left open, and when Jonathan followed Nancy through to the back room, the door to the service hallway was standing open as well.

“Which way to we go?” Nancy asked.

Jonathan looked both ways, and they seemed equally long. There were lit-up exit arrows at either end, which had to mean there were two exits. He suggested to Nancy, “You go right, I’ll go left?”

“Meet back here in five?”

Jonathan nodded, and Nancy returned his nod, so he went left.

He passed door after door, each one labeled with a number. Some had the business name on them as well. None seemed likely avenues of escape for a Russian spy. After turning at the intersection he’d seen from Scoops Ahoy, he spotted was another exit arrow at the end of the second hallway. He hurried down this one, and turned the corner.

At the end was an exit door. Sprawled out on the floor just in front of it was a figure in a blue uniform.

“Oh, no,” Jonathan said to himself as he headed closer. Steve wasn’t moving. Was he breathing at all? “No, no, no.” That was a puddle of blood on the white linoleum around him. “Nancy! Nancy, I found him!” Jonathan called back, hoping his voice would echo far enough to reach her.

As he knelt down next to Steve, the knee of his jeans ended up in the blood, soaked through in just a few seconds. Steve looked far too pale, and there was a bloody patch on the right side of his chest. A bullet wound.

That Russian bastard had shot Steve!

Jonathan put his ear to Steve's chest, letting out a harsh sigh of relief when he heard Steve's heart still beating. It was a little faster than he would've thought, given the fact that Steve was unconscious.

There was so much blood. Jonathan had to stop the bleeding, right? The only spare cloth he had was his shirt, so he took it off and pressed it to the dark patch on Steve's chest.

Steve's arm twitched, his hand brushing the side of Jonathan's leg as a soft groan escaped his lips. "Ow. Shit."

"Sorry." Jonathan tried to wipe the tear from his left eye on his sleeve before realizing his whole shirt was otherwise occupied. Shit, the blood was already starting to soak through. "Just...hang on, okay? We're gonna get you some help."

Steve took a shaky, too-wet breath and hooked his fingers on Jonathan's wrist. "Glad you found me."

"I wasn't gonna—" Jonathan sighed. "You were so stupid, going with that guy. How could you do that?"

Steve's fingers tightened around Jonathan's wrist as he took another wet, sucking breath. "Will's your— little brother."

"Yeah, *mine*," Jonathan told him, pressing harder on the wound. "My brother."

"Couldn't let you— offer to— go instead."

The implication there made Jonathan's heart flutter and clench. "Steve... Why would you do that? For me?"

"I know. Doesn't make sense," he muttered, closing his eyes. For a second Jonathan thought he'd passed out, but then he said, "Just because you... hate me... doesn't— doesn't mean I... I, you know... I don't hate you. Not even close."

Words failed Jonathan when he tried to assure Steve he didn't hate him either. So he did the only thing he could think of and ducked

down, pressing his lips to Steve's.

Steve took a sharp breath through his nose, kissing back for a second before tearing his lips away. Jonathan watched Steve's face, expecting to be told he'd read the situation wrong, but instead, Steve coughed. His ribs rose and fell with each cough, and when Steve turned back, there was some blood at the corner of his mouth.

No, no, no! Jonathan couldn't lose Steve now! Not when he'd just gotten him back!

Then he realized what he was forgetting. "Nancy! Nancy, I need help!"

He heard her heels clicking across the linoleum at a breakneck pace, before she appeared from around the corner. "Oh, my god!" She ran to them, dropping down to her knees on Steve's other side. She folded Steve's hand into her own. "He's been shot?"

"Yeah. It kind of sucks," Steve said, his voice hoarse before starting another coughing spell. "Don't recommend it."

Nancy gave a soft laugh and brushed Steve's hair back before kissing his forehead. "I'll go get one of those ambulances. You're gonna be okay."

"Super."

Jonathan watched Nancy stand, telling her, "Be quick. I think it's in his lung."

"Got it." Nancy pressed a kiss to Jonathan's forehead too, then ran off, her shoes clicking across the floor again.

Steve coughed again, groaning with pain. He turned toward Jonathan, eyes still closed, and whispered, "If I die—"

"Don't talk like that," Jonathan insisted, putting as much pressure on the wound as he could. "You're going to be fine."

"If I'm not. I'm— I'm glad you and Nancy have each other." After another cough and a wince that had him wrapping his fingers around

Jonathan's wrist and squeezing, he added. "You're good together."

Thinking of the way Nancy had left a kiss on Steve's forehead, and the way she still looked at him now and then, Jonathan had an idea. It was a stupid idea, but he was just desperate enough to try it. "Hey, if you pull through, will you go out with me and Nancy? Like on a date?"

"Both of you?" he asked, but there was an interested glint in his eyes when he opened them.

Jonathan nodded and kissed Steve again. "But you've gotta live long enough for it to happen."

Steve gave one chuckle before groaning, putting his hand over Jonathan's on his chest. "Fuck, this hurts!"

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have done this for me." Jonathan kissed him again. "I don't know how I'm ever going to repay you for this."

"Got... a few ideas..." Steve said. The edge of his mouth curled up in a tiny smile, but Steve's eyes slid closed and the hand over Jonathan's went limp.

"Steve?"

No response.

Jonathan shook him a little. "C'mon, Steve. Wake up!"

The sound of Nancy's heels returning felt like a godsend. "Hurry!" he called over his shoulder. "Please!"

Nancy came around the corner, followed by an EMT carrying a bag, and another one carrying a backboard. Nancy met Jonathan's eyes and stopped, putting a hand to her mouth. The EMTs passed her by.

The one with the bag knelt down next to Jonathan, taking a stethoscope from his bag. He put it to Steve's chest and listened for a second. "Pulse present," he told his partner. "Fast and thready. He's in hypovolemic shock."

The other EMT took a pair of scissors from his bag and nudged Jonathan out of the way. He got Steve's shirt off and rolled him, wiping the blood off his back with a large piece of gauze. "GSW. Entry and exit. Let's pack these and get him on saline."

"Agreed."

Jonathan stepped back and let them work. After a minute, one of them handed a blanket to Nancy and gestured at Jonathan. As she wrapped it around his shoulders, he realized that his shirt was on the ground beside Steve's, almost soaked with blood. He let Nancy wrap him up and held her when she hugged him. Realizing his hands were still full of blood as well, he did his best not to get blood on Nancy's clothes.

The EMTs put Steve on the board and started carrying him through the mall and out to the ambulance. Jonathan and Nancy followed. As they walked, Jonathan told Nancy about promising Steve a date if he pulled through. "Is that okay?"

Catching Jonathan by the face and kissing him, Nancy met his eyes and said, "That is more than okay."

"If it's not, I'm sure we could let him—"

Still holding his face, Nancy asked, "Do you want to date him?"

"I don't want to break up with you."

"That's not what I asked."

Jonathan closed his eyes and despite (or maybe because of) everything, he nodded. "Yeah, I do. Do you?"

Nancy paused for a moment, letting him go, and Jonathan was sure she was about to break up with him. "Yeah, I do."

"What?"

"I want to date Steve," Nancy repeated. "I never... I mean, when we broke up, I still had feelings for him. I still do."

“Oh.” Part of Jonathan wanted to be hurt that he didn’t know Nancy still had feelings for Steve. That seemed pretty hypocritical, given the fact that Jonathan had kissed him several times in the past fifteen minutes. “Okay. Good. That’s good.”

“Let’s catch up with him.”

With a nod, Jonathan took Nancy’s hand and they followed Steve out to the ambulance waiting for him. As they loaded Steve in, still unconscious, Jonathan prayed that this wouldn’t be the last time he’d see Steve alive.

~*~

Nancy and Jonathan sat in the hospital waiting room, holding hands. News of Steve’s condition was sparse, and Nancy got more and more impatient as time went on. Her mother had come and gone, giving Nancy a look when she said she was going to wait to hear about Steve. It wasn’t that unusual to care about an ex-boyfriend, was it? Especially when he was in surgery with life-threatening injuries?

Around midnight, Jonathan turned to her and said, “I’m sorry I never told you I liked... I like... boys.”

“I understand why you didn’t.” Nancy smiled and kissed his hand, sure she had no idea how scary it had been for him, not only realizing he was a little different, but also having to deal with the aftermath of his first relationship. She knew a little bit about first relationships ending badly. Still, she didn’t want Jonathan to think she was okay with him omitting big parts of his life. “I’m a little sad you didn’t trust me enough to share it before now.”

“I never...” He shrugged. “I try not to think about it. Ever. It never occurred to me that I should tell you. I guess I figured it was just a thing that happened. A phase that ended in the worst way possible.”

Nancy took Jonathan’s face in her hands and kissed him. “You don’t have to be afraid to tell me anything, okay? I love you.”

His warm hands wrapped around her wrists and a hint of a smile at the edge of his lips, Jonathan murmured, “I love you too.”

Someone at the doorway cleared their throat. Nancy let go of Jonathan's face and looked to see Steve's mother standing there, a perplexed look on her face. She gave a flick of her wrist, like she was waving away the confusion. "Surgery went well. He's awake. You can see him for a few minutes, but then they want no visitors until tomorrow."

"Thank you!" Nancy jumped to her feet and pulled Jonathan along with her. "What room is he in?"

Mrs. Harrington directed them to the room before saying, "I'm getting a cup of coffee. Tell Steven I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Sure."

Nancy pushed open the door, waiting for Jonathan to take it from her before she stepped further into the room. She had to walk around a curtain, but then there he was. Steve laid in the hospital bed, propped up a bit. She could see bandages sticking out his hospital gown collar on the right side of his chest. He blinked a few times before looking over at Nancy. He raised his hand, giving her a tired wave.

"Oh, Steve," she said, taking a few more steps until she was at his side. She took his hand with one of hers and used the other to brush his hair back from his face. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"Me too," Jonathan said, hovering at Steve's feet for a second before walking up the other side of the bed and taking Steve's left hand. "Thanks for not dying."

Voice hoarse and raspy, Steve replied, "Thanks for finding me in time."

"Jonathan told me about his promise," Nancy said, smiling a bit when Steve frowned at her and shook his head slightly. "As soon as you feel well enough, we'll take you on a date. Both of us."

"Yeah?" Steve's smile was slow, but brilliant once it appeared. "Glad you agreed."

Brushing her hand back through Steve's hair, she asked, "Can I kiss

you?”

“Yeah, but hospital breath—”

“I don’t care.” Nancy leaned in and kissed Steve, trying to tell him just how much she loved and missed him. Even after kissing only Jonathan for the past eight months, the kiss felt achingly familiar to her. Steve smiled against her lips, and by the time Nancy pulled back, they were both chuckling softly.

Nancy looked over at Jonathan then, checking in with him. She was relieved to see he didn’t look jealous, but instead fond. Nodding her head toward Steve, she told Jonathan, “Quick, before his mom comes back.”

Jonathan’s eyes went wider for a split second before he leaned in, his free hand caressing Steve’s cheek before they kissed. Nancy watched as they both melted into the kiss, and her heart clenched with happiness for them. After a moment, she wanted to be included too, so she leaned in and rested her head next to Steve’s on his pillow, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Jonathan whispered, “You’ve got to get better soon, okay? I’ve learned a few things since we used to make out.”

Steve chuckled and kissed Jonathan again before turning his head and kissing Nancy again. “I’ve died,” he murmured against her lips, “and gone to heaven, I think.”

“You deserve it,” Nancy told Steve. Kissing him once more, she said, “I still love you, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” he said, turning his head away from her to cough a few times against his left shoulder, wincing with pain as he turned back. Nancy tried to give him some space, but he squeezed her hand and held her close. “I still love you, too.”

Nancy smiled at him, then at Jonathan, who grinned back at her. Everything was going to work out just fine.

Author's Note:

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear what you thought in the comments below!

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